Vir Assan

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Vir Assan

by ChampionOfThedas

Summary

Vir Tanadhal is the known as the "Way of Three Trees". The elven goddess of the hunt, Andruil, taught these to Dalish hunters in years of yore to make sure that they respected her art, to respect nature, and remain resolute in purpose.

Vir Assan, The Way of the Arrow:
Fly straight and do not waver.

Will might be Clanless now and he might not have been a hunter, but the ways of his People never left him. He wanders now from village to village, helping people where he can and hiding from Templars. When he is found by a Seeker of Truth named Jack Crawford, he finds himself with a choice: run and be hunted or stay and help the Seekers. It wasn't really a choice.

But for a mage to walk among Templars and the common folk and not be bound to a Circle of Magi, they need to have legitimacy in the eyes of society. Furthermore, it needs to be someone with enough power so they won't be questioned and a favorable attitude towards magic. It is a good thing that Sister Alana Bloom knows someone like that.

08/24/24 HIATUS WITH THE INTENTION TO FINISH, SEE SERIES NOTES OR BEGINNING AUTHOR'S NOTE FOR DETAILS.

Notes

Hello! If you are rereading this work and wondered where the original note went, never fear. This is a much newer and (hopefully shorter one). This story has been a long labor of me running back and forth with it since 2017, back when it was a completely separate work called Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts (now deleted). I've always wanted to get back to this, and with Dragon Age Veilguard on the way, it felt appropriate.

A couple of warnings. This is based on two very dark series with themes to match. If you are familiar with both Dragon Age and NBC's Hannibal, then you won't need this warning. As just a few examples, the works in question have murder, gore, cannibalism, abuse (personally and systematically), manipulation/gaslighting (which is abuse but I thought I'd be specific), sexual assault, suicide etc. I'll do my best to tag appropriate subjects, but if I miss something, let me know.

I do have a codex for the series which will explain lore, some unfamiliar terms, where in the dragon age part of the timeline the story is in, and some of my decisions made when writing depending on the subject.

This story is currently being heavily edited. As of the time you are looking at this author's note, the first chapter (this one) has been finished, but none of the codex entries. Keep this in mind and check on this note every so often if you want to see what's changed.

Andaran atish'an: Enter this place in peace. A formal and traditional elvhen greeting.

Andaran atish'an

Chapter Summary

> "There's power in stories, though. That's all history is: the best tales. The ones that last. Might as well be mine." - Varric Tethras, Dragon Age 2

The guards of the small town of Val Firmin gave him a wide berth as they searched the one room home of the Marlow family… not that he blamed them. Most normal people feared strangers, let alone one wearing “barbaric” clothing and wielding a staff that clearly marked him as a mage. The fact that he had pointed ears and six Mabari hounds with him snuffling about probably didn’t help. Truly, Will was remarkably lucky that this village didn’t run him out with torches and pitchforks as soon as he came into sight. It had happened at villages both larger and smaller than this before, several times in fact. Once he explained that he had heard from Velun about the recent murder and was “sent” to help, they felt more comfortable around him. Granted, he wasn’t exactly lying; he just had happened to be hiding out in Velun when he had been told he needed to help these people... by a spirit. He just elected to leave that detail out, for simplicity’s sake, of course.

The poor couple was scattered across the floor of their home; the man was spread across the threshold, blood crusted and dried across his neck with a bolt lodged in the vocal cords and another in the jugular. The spray of the blood spread on the wall suggested that the vocal cords came first and the jugular was targeted as the man staggered back. The woman was laid out on the floor near the window, the scrapes and bruises and tears of clothing suggesting that she had tried to crawl out of it as the intruder broke in. It had taken her much longer to die.

Long enough for the perpetrator to work.

With a quiet sigh, Will ushered the guards out and closed off the little shack on the outskirts of Velun. He reached out and felt the weakness in the Veil that would allow him to reach through into the Fade. He didn’t do this often, so hopefully it wouldn’t strain him too much. He placed the dried herbs that he used to induce a sleep-like state of mind in his mouth as he settled against a wall so he wouldn’t fall over. As the world went black, he extended his mind and thoughts, prodding the weakness he sensed earlier. It would only take a little *push* ...

Suddenly, he was hovering in the woods outside to the back of the home. A quick check of the perimeter and his body moved without his permission and dashed around to the front door. A swift kick brought it down and the loaded crossbow that had been in his hand (though he only now noticed it) was pulled upward into a firing position and launched at the startled man. The man staggered back towards their two-person cot and his female companion screamed and ran towards the side (the hearth and cooking area), but that prey could wait until later. A reload of his crossbow, impossibly fast in his practiced hands, and then it fired again. The man was dying. He would be dead before this was over.

His body dragged itself to the left with increasing urgency as the woman climbed on the table to push herself out the window. He reloaded as he got closer, but not before dipping the new bolt in a paralytic. She was half-way out when he released the bolt and it sliced through her femoral artery. His prey tried to yell, but the air in her lungs was knocked out as her sternum hit the window ledge. He dragged her back in as her kicking became weaker and weaker, until it was no more.

Will came back to himself with a blink and found he was looking straight in the chest of a rather large human man. It was a good thing he had taken the precaution of leaning against the wall beforehand, because the sheer size of him was startling enough. A quick glance up showed that the man was very large due to muscle and the general broadness of his stature. He wore sturdy dragonbone plate mail depicting an eye encircled with the sunburst of the Chantry. Fuck. Someone got the authorities. Will quickly glanced around for the exits, trying and failing to not look nervous, but was interrupted by the laughter from the Seeker of Truth.

“I apologize if I made you nervous young Ser, but worry not. I’m not here to take you into custody and I see no reason to yet. Unless, of course, you believe you are a danger to these people.”

Will swallowed nervously. The very last thing that he wanted was to be dragged to a Circle, particularly here in Orlais. They weren’t kind to elves there.

“Good,” the man replies to Will, only half paying attention. “Well, my name is Jack Crawford, a Seeker of Truth. I realize this is a bit sudden, but I’ve been tracking you for a couple of weeks.”

Uh-oh.

“- I’ve heard you’re good at what you do, and that what you do has allowed small villages like this one to have justice for their community. Some have even gone as far to say that you are favored by the Maker.”

“I wouldn’t call it that,” Will sharply replies. “I simply read the area and have a good imagination.” And communicate with spirits, but he would like to not be called an abomination today.

“Can I borrow your imagination?”

As it turns out, Jack Crawford was… okay. He managed to grab some guards and relay the information that Will spouted out before dragging the young mage off. Thankfully, none of the guards bothered to try to detain him; having a very large higher-up from one of the most secretive orders of the Chantry between the guards and himself seemed to come in handy. Messere Crawford also had horses and a cart, where Will made sure that his six Mabari were comfortable. Apparently, Jack had heard about them and came prepared - which didn’t make him feel anxious at all. However, he didn’t bat an eye at Will being an elf or call him knife-ear, so there was a plus. After Will and his pack were inside, the group took off. It was only then that Jack explained his motives for being there.

“Red Crossing? We’re going all the way to Red Crossing?”

“There are people disappearing there! Someone needs to go in and stop it. Eight young girls abducted from eight different farms all in the last eight months.”

Will paused, “I thought there were seven.”

“There were. I got a message declaring the eighth shortly before I found you. If you knew about them, why didn’t you help? You’re more than capable.”

He fidgeted in his seat. The man, Crawford, was either extremely oblivious or had a low sense of self-preservation and thought that others should have the same. “Ser, in case you didn’t notice, I’m an elf.”

“I did.” Low sense of self-preservation then.

“And Red Crossing does not have the greatest history with elves.” Which was putting it very mildly. Oh no, the site of a conflict about a romance and slaughter leading to an Exalted March against the newly re-established Elven people wasn’t going to respond well to him.

Crawford scoffed. “No place has a great history with elves. I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

Oblivious as well. Great. He looked directly at Crawford’s neck and opened his mouth to explain to this **shem** just why going to Red Crossing was a bad idea, before thinking better of it. Humans have a tendency to not listen to elves already, and this one seemed like he would listen less than most. At least he got the vague feeling that it wasn’t because he was an elf specifically and more because that was just the way this human was. He didn’t know if that made it better or worse. He didn’t know this man, they had just met afterall, and so he had no way of knowing what Seeker Jack Crawford would do if he refused.

He sighed, “You’re calling them abductions because you don’t have any bodies.”

Jack smiled smugly, which just made the whole situation worse. Way to rub it in. The smile lasted only a second, before being replaced by something more somber. “No, we didn’t. No bodies, no parts of bodies, nothing that comes out of bodies, no evidence of demons or blood magic, weapons or even tracks. We’ve searched the woods around the village, the local inn, the market, and the shared fields. Nothing.”

“Then those girls weren’t taken from where you think they were taken from.”

“Where were they taken from?”

Will shrugged, “I dunno. Someplace else.” He did magic, but there were limits. He couldn’t just *know* things.

The wind blew some leaves past his face, brown and dried from the summer heat but starting to give way to autumn nonetheless. Traveling through the Exalted Plains to the very edge of the Dales was about as bad as one could expect. The war that had been over seven ages ago had burnt the beautiful forests to the ground, leaving rolling hills of dead grass and waspy lone trees. The red of the earth peeked out at travelers, but, even then, there was just enough

green in the trees and ground that one could believe that the land was beginning to heal. Will plucked an errant leaf from his hair and crinkled it between his fingers before letting go.

“I’ve only seen land look like this after it experienced a minor Blight,” Jack Crawford said, startling him. He had been watching Will, unbeknownst to the mage, and there was something sharp in his eyes that Will couldn’t identify.

“It’s sad that so much of our history is full of fighting each other to the point that the land suffers,” Will replied, almost hushed. The air had stilled with neither wind nor birds disturbing the quiet, making his voice suddenly loud. Even the Mabari were silent, hunching inside the cart as if they were afraid of something. Jack looked back towards the road, but still kept an eye on Will from the seat next to him. “Of course a Dalish would say that.” Will sighed, because of course it would come up at some point. “I’m not technically Dalish anymore.”

“Anymore? Well, you were Dalish long enough to get those tattoos,” the larger man said, gesturing vaguely to his face. Will gently traced the lines of ink which were a deep green, almost black. There were lines down his nose and extending from his brows up his forehead surrounding the stylized face of a raven, leaves curving on his cheekbones to his ear, and small strokes following the jut of his chin with a small almost triangle at the point. They were odd to humans, who could not read the pattern of blood writing, nor understand what it gave the People. He may not be part of a Clan any longer, but he would always consider himself one of them in his heart.

“You mean Vallaslin? I suppose that’s true, they are only given to adults,” Will said to Crawford, knowing that giving a little might make the man drop it.

“A rite of passage?”

“More or less,” Will replied and looked away in an attempt to dismiss the subject. A small jolt of frustration with himself went through him as he realized Ser Crawford had just been interrogating him. The Seeker was more subtle than he expected, purposefully being a little antagonistic but not hostile during their conversation, starting with being dismissive regarding Will’s concerns about Red Crossing in an effort to get a read on Will’s opinions on humans and his own people. The man was good at playing into others’ expectations and acting in a fashion that would get them to talk, if only to argue with him. Well, he still wasn’t sure about Jack Crawford’s sense of self-preservation, but oblivious the man was not. Will would have to be more cautious when speaking with the man until he got a better read on him and what was acceptable to be honest about in his presence.

Crawford spoke again and broke the tension building in Will’s head, “The last girl that disappeared was named Elise Nichols. Her parents left north to visit family and didn’t want to leave their farm unattended. She was on her way to watch it for them and was set to arrive a few hours after they left. Hired help was supposed to come in a few days later, but they found no one.”

“Did they-?”

“We did have the roads checked. No sign of her there.”

“I suppose the rest are dead, don’t you? He’s not keeping them or he wouldn’t need another.” Will answered, knowing it sounded callous. They were already gone; he wouldn’t be able to help them.

“So we focus on Elise Nichols to find this man. Perhaps he has her?”

“Perhaps.” For all the good that it would do. “Was there anything about them that was vaguely similar? There has to be a reason that all of these girls were taken?”

Crawford paused before nodding to himself. “From what we’ve gathered, they do all look similar. Roughly the same age, same body type, same hair color, same eye color… So, their looks connect them; He has a type?”

“No, no!” Will gestured vaguely to stop that line of thinking. “It’s not about how they look specifically, but who they look like.” Crawford’s face said he didn’t see a difference. Will supposed it was sort of a technicality. “If they are that similar, then one of the girls he takes is special to him, the rest are only because they look like her. She is the one that will find us our man.”

“Which one?”

“It’s possible that she was the first one taken and he is reliving the moment or she’s the last and he’s warming up to her. It could also be the case that she is mixed in among them, because he did both. It’s quite possible that because he wants her for himself, he doesn’t want anyone else to know why or how she is special, so disguising the girl is paramount. Unfortunately figuring it out at this stage is unlikely.” At least with physical evidence.

“I need you on this, do you understand me?”

Will made a non-committal noise.

Two weeks. Two weeks of riding with Jack Crawford were enough for a lifetime. The man was incessantly curious, which Will would normally consider a good thing. It just so happened that he was curious about all of the things that Will would rather not talk about, and good at getting them out of him, too. Culture, religion, personal history, his magical abilities, and previous haunts were all topics he would avoid if he could. Even so, the Seeker had an interesting sense of humor and a sense of duty that was admirable in any person. There was a possibility that he could grow to like this man, given enough time. Admittedly, it was time that Will did not want to spend in the presence of a man who could arrest him at any moment.

It was during a conversation about the Maker and the Creators that a crow finally appeared and swooped by heading the other direction, alerting them to the presence of life. A small village crept on the horizon. The closer the cart got, the more haphazard Red Crossing appeared. The entirety of the village was spread out across the landscape and, while the bulk of the village was huddled together, many of the homes were a good distance away from each other. Most of them had small gardens to grow family crops and there were larger farms that grew the crops that would go exclusively for the nobility, which could easily bleed small

villages like this dry. Behind the village Will could see the start of the forest, the individual trees impossibly tall against the rest of the dying plain before eventually joining the hoard of the woodland.

Jack pulled up to the village's small set of stables and delivered a large sum of silver to the Horsemaster. The negotiation was perfunctory and, after, the two set off through the village and were met with much staring. A Seeker of Truth in full plate mail, insignia out for everybody to see, and an elf in ratty leathers with six Mabari and a staff marking him as a mage were bound to get some. Small villages in Orlais were not very friendly to mages (let alone apostates), so Will stayed as close as possible to Jack.

They arrived at the small farm with a decent amount of fanfare from the locals. Heads peeked in and out of windows and people stopped and glanced at them until the moment that they were invited into the Nichols' home.

While Jack spoke with the family about the situation, Will wandered through the small main room of the house; they were much better off than the Marlows. Their cabin had several rooms and easy access to a community outhouse in this part of town. Small trinkets lined walls and the cooking area also had a small area for entertaining guests attached. The family had a separate room devoted for sleep and another for bathing, divided with complete walls and doors instead of simple partitions. Herbs and rabbits hung from the ceiling and the small garden in the back was well kept, while two bowls, one empty and one filled with water, sat dutifully in the corner.

Currently, Messere Nichols was sitting in a lightly cushioned chair, hands buried in his blonde-gray hair. "She could have gone off by herself for a moment; she… was a very private young woman. She was having problems with her mentor; she wanted to be a guard, not a seamstress. She loved horses. Maybe she just found a stray horse and just rode off." Madame Nichols sat in the chair next to him and rubbed his hand. "She looks like the other girls?" she asked practically. Clearly, she held out less hope than her husband.

" She does," Jack nodded gravely. He had opted to stand up to give them the news and Will moved to stand with him, even though it made him feel like he was trying to intimidate the poor couple.

Messere Nichols looked to the Seeker pleadingly, "Could she still be alive?"

"We don't know, but we can learn." Jack glanced over at Will, who had been subtly exploring the house with his eyes. The bowl nagged at him. Dogs were not popular in Orlais, due to their association with Ferelden, but he had seen many stray cats wandering around the area.

"How's your cat?" he gambled.

"What?"

Will nodded, "Yes. How is the cat? Wasn't Elise supposed to feed it? It would have been behaving oddly or gone by this point if it was starving. Did the neighbors say anything?"

Messere Nichols shook his head slowly, “No, nothing. Stubby was here when the Martins arrived. At least, she was here when we came back.”

“Is … Stubby an accomplished mouser?”

Madame Nichols glanced over with a cunning look; Will got the feeling that she might know where he was going with it. That or she simply had a feeling he was onto something. “No, she wasn’t particularly good. We had to give the Martins’ tomcat access to the house to keep the vermin out.”

Jack, who had been staring at Will with confusion, gently grabbed Will’s arm and led him away from the Nichols. “Give us a moment, please!” he called and then turned to Will to whisper, “What was that about?”

“He took her from here Jack. She got home from her trip, fed the cat. Then he took her.” A moment passed between the two of them, before Jack called out to the guards: “Get me the rest of my team!” They had been waiting dutifully outside and rushed to accomplish the order given by the esteemed Seeker.

“Why do you need them?” Messere demanded before the Madame hushed him.

“Can I see your daughter’s room?” She nodded to her husband and gestured for him to show Will. If either of them were frustrated, they didn’t show it. He only saw and sensed confusion, worry, and a little guilt.

Messere Nichols gestured towards the room where his father had been staying, a spare that they used for storage and guests. His footsteps echoed quietly on the wooden floor and Will saw that their cat, Stubby, was dragging his claws across. He quietly opened the door that the cat was pawing at, and behind him, the Nichols gasped as they saw their daughter lying peacefully on the bed. “Elise?” Will heard as he noticed the decaying state of the girl’s body, and he turned around immediately to push the parents out. They didn’t need to see this. “You need to leave,” he growled at them and Jack came up to usher the couple away, but a wail pierced the tense quiet. They had seen her.

With that, Jack pulled the two weeping parents away and Will went back into the room to investigate Elise. He hesitated before touching her; it was swollen and starting to turn green, but to him it was as if her skin might break. Four red blots stained the white nightgown, too fine for this family (no matter how well off they were). He pulled the blanket up slightly; if he ignored the decomposition, now she was simply asleep. A few people were flitting around him, investigating the wound and pulling back the blanket he had just tucked in. They drifted in and around him as he opened up his bag of herbs to put himself into a waking sleep, until suddenly they were gone.

The Seeker walked in behind him and almost placed a hand on his shoulder before pulling back. “I’ve got them holed up outside of the house. They weren’t happy, but I gave them a couple of gold pieces and told them to head to the inn. I sent a guard to get the rest of my party; they’re on their way.” Will nodded absently, still staring at the still girl in front of him. The blanket hadn’t been moved. Jack nodded and began to walk away. He glanced back at the mage. “Will? I’m going outside now; I’ll make sure that nobody interrupts you. Come get me

if you're ready to talk; if you don't feel like it, you don't talk." Will made a noise of acknowledgement and he was alone. Finally.

Silence fell, only interrupted by the inhale and exhale of his lungs. He popped the herbs in his mouth, chewed them to a pulp, and closed his eyes. Everything grew abruptly heavier, and then it took him away.

Elise Nichols slept peacefully when he came in. He had a lot of practice at it at this point; she was so beautiful. He needed to keep her. He needed to have her. A moment.

He leapt forward, clutching at her throat. Blood roared in his ears and buzzed in his veins. She wakes, shocked and stares into his eyes. So scared, she shouldn't worry. He will make it all over soon; no one will hurt her-

"So you're the mysterious apostate Jack has been all over!"

Will blinked, startled. The high is still buzzing in his veins and he can barely look at the woman to his left. From what he could see, she was a human, but something about her features gave her a more fluid look. Her hair was inky and pulled back out of her tapered face and she wore heavy leather armor that was styled for function, not form. Beautiful in an aesthetic sense, but strung out nerves were preventing any further judgements, particularly when large dark eyes were staring at him quizzically.

"You're not supposed to be here," he muttered, voice breathless and pitched with guilt.

"Found antler velvet in some of the wounds. Came back over to check," she gave him a calculating look. The longer she spoke, the more words grated on his nerves. An irrational anger awoke inside him at the noise of the waking world. "You're clearly not a Seeker; You look fresh from the forest. What'd Jack do to get you to help?"

"He just asked." Fresh from the forest?

"Hmm.." she paused and then opened her mouth to speak, something flitting across her eyes, but then Jack stomped in, shoulders tense. "Katz! I told you not to come in here!"

"I found antler velvet in the wounds, like she was gored. I was trying to see if maybe there was more, but you made us leave!

"Wait! Wait a minute," came a voice from behind Jack. It came from a young human man with a messy dark beard and hair. He was gangly and lanky, but held himself with surprisingly easy sturdiness. "Halla and harts pin their adversaries; they strangle them! That's how they would kill a fennec. They don't *gore* them."

"Alright so Elise was strangled; her ribs were broken," Jack suggested.

"And one of them would go after a girl? I think not," the human shot back. Jack protested that he was not actually suggesting that.

"Antler velvet is actually an exceptional reagent for healing," Will added. The young human man's eyes lit up. "It is! But what does that have to do with-?"

“You think he was trying to heal her?” Jack interrupted. He was staring Will down; Will shifted under Jack’s gaze. The man was over a head taller than him and disconcertingly close.

“He wanted to undo it as much as he could. She was already dead, and he wanted her forgiveness.” His hand itched and he was overcome with the urge to gently caress her face. The spirit that observed the scene was trying to offer comfort to a dead girl.

“Why?” It took a minute, but Will recognized the feeling the spirit was trying to convey: *Love* . It was an all-encompassing, consuming love that wanted to harm as much as it wanted to heal. *He thinks he is helping them. He loves them.*

All of the people were speaking around him, positing ideas about what made Elise Nichols different. Confirmation of appearance was helpful, the group now had a template on which to base the others. They all tried to ignore the corpse nearby. Just goes to show that even the most hardened soldiers have souls, apparently. “Unfortunately, this is the only body that we have, so I can’t confirm anything for sure,” finished Seeker Katz.

“He loves them,” Will said, interrupting whatever might’ve been said next.

“What?” Crawford asked. He was incredulous. Of course he was; he couldn’t feel it. The man didn’t understand that a person could love and kill their love. Will barely understood it and he could feel it as if it was his own.

“He loves them! I don’t know why, but he does. Something about one of these girls is special; he’s fixated on her. He had already killed Elise, but for whatever reason he couldn’t do what he did to the other girls to her.”

“He put her back…. Is she the one he’s fixated on?”

“No. The ritual, whatever he was doing, was broken and he couldn’t show her love as he perceives it.” He hesitated for a moment, swallowing back the poisonous thoughts and trying to clear his head. “It’s-it’s an apology.”

The woman that he met earlier formally introduced herself as Seeker Beverly Katz and walked with him to the inn, for which he was admittedly grateful. Pushing himself into the Fade, through the Veil, was exhausting. Doing it twice in such a short amount of time? Even worse. Usually he tried to wait a few weeks, maybe a month, before trying to push through the Veil again. Granted, he could feel the spirits hanging around people all the time due to his sensitivity to them, but that was passive. Far more damaging than the exhaustion was the imprint left on his eyelids of shapes and spirits and red running. His hands still felt the phantom pains of flesh and muscle yielding beneath the pads of his fingers.

The room that he got was small; it was a small town, so the inn did not have much space to begin with. The only reason he even got a room instead of being kicked out was because he was being provided for by the Seekers of Truth. Hurrah. Of course, a powerful Chantry organization would be able to get any room that they want in a small village. Gossip has probably been prolific. Thank the Creators that Seeker Crawford seemed to be the type that could mitigate any negative reactions merely with his presence. He must be high up on the chain.

The two of them walked in silence, Seeker Katz attempting small bits of conversation. A moment passed between them, before he saw a small, bedraggled four-legged creature in the distance. Once he recognized it, Will dashed towards it, seeing a rope hanging from its dirty neck and skin sticking to its ribs. A Mabari! In Orlais? Usually he found them in Ferelden or hiding out in the forests and if they were in Orlais, it was with nobles that treated them as exotic.

He could hear her running behind him to catch up and, hearing both of them, the Mabari scattered. Will slowed down in response and began whistling and clicking his tongue, attempting to find the dog and get it to approach him. It turned, and he pulled out jerky rations to entice it closer.

The hound inched closer to the jerky and eventually stopped, sniffing at the two in front of him, tongue lapping around the maw. He gently bit down on the end of the treat, expecting it to be tossed away before snatching it into his mouth. Will patiently held out another and another until the Mabari was nuzzling his hand for more. His ears were soft and he looked at Will with big, trusting eyes. Loyalty. It felt good to have it. “Look who’s got a new friend,” Ser Katz said, startling Will. In the face of a sweet hound, he had forgotten she was there. At least she seemed amused.

“I suppose I do.”

“I heard that Mabari bond for life and only ever with one person.”

“I’ve heard the same.”

A moment passed between them, before the Seeker gently motioned for the two to follow her. It took a while, but they made their way to a small reservoir behind the inn that he was staying at. With her help, the Mabari’s matted fur and bloody paws were scrubbed and brushed until the hound was as clean as any dog could be. Will brought him to the rest of the pack, which had been staying in the nearby stables, and carefully introduced him to the group. Fur crashed together with happy yips, welcoming a new friend and family member to their little group. “What’s his name?” asked his companion.

“Winston.”

She snorted, but he got the feeling that she didn’t disapprove. They watched the hounds play for a minute before Ser Katz decided it was time for Will to rest and “persuaded” (Will would call it bullied) him to go to bed.

The energy coursing through his veins did keep him up for a while longer. When he finally retired for the night, he allowed himself to be lulled to sleep with the noises being made in and around the inn. People were still milling about as birds cried out in the sky. It was nice to sleep in a soft bed, rather than a bedroll on the dirt, but then he would be surrounded by running water or night insects waking up rather than woodsmoke and washing dishes. Will hated to admit it, but as soft as the bed was, there was just no settling upon it. He twisted and twisted until, on one vicious turn, it landed right near the unseeing face of Elise Nichols. Her head turned to stare back at him.

Her mouth, forming small words over and over that were too fast to see. Finally, in a long, slow movement, it rolled back. He reached for her; if this was really her spirit, maybe she could give him a sign! Just as he touched the edge of her blanket, she rose from the bed. Her body ascended, higher and higher, until it should have touched the ceiling… but there was no ceiling. Only an endless abyss and she kept going.

The next morning, Will woke up feeling the worst kind of hangover in existence, and he hadn't had a drop of alcohol the night before. He had been asked to meet with everyone pretty early, and pulling back the curtains on his window revealed that he was already running behind. Mind foggy, he started getting ready for the day.

Will splashed his face in the basin, but his skin still felt sticky with blood and sweat created from the experience during the night. The herbs that he took for restful sleep had been working less and less lately; his dreams had become increasingly vivid and showed no sign of stopping. This could get dangerous soon. He tried to chew on some willowbark, given that he wouldn't have time to make it into tea, but the attempt was more difficult than he cared for. His mouth felt tacky and filled with dirt and dust. The water he had been using was slightly opaque and had small motes of dirt floating inside from sitting stale all night. He plunged his face in it and held his face tight and closed. A sharp smell filled his nose and, distantly, there was the repeated sound of knocking past the dulling caused by water in his ears. The noise grew louder and more urgent and he burst from the water as the door to his room was invaded by Seeker Crawford.

"What are you still doing here? Beverly told you to meet us outside the inn shortly after sunrise!"

"Sorry," Will said, rubbing the water and tiredness from his face. "I didn't really sleep and lost track of time."

"We all do from time to time, but you are not on your own now; you need to be more responsible," the larger man demanded. "We need to talk."

"Could you give me a minute?" Will asked, conscious of how vulnerable he was at the moment. Crawford nodded back at him and exited the room, much to his relief. Alone again and he quickly cleaned the room and bed of sweat and dirt as much as he could. He packed his bags up and finished dressing up in his leathers before he opened the door back up for the Seeker. The man filled the room and turned sharply to Will. "Do you respect my judgment?"

Honestly, WIll barely knew the man, but he seemed to have a good gauge of people and had the power and agency to give him protection. Most Seekers, Templars, or general authority figures looked down upon anything not human and many felt completely justified in the abuse of non-humans, but this man trusted him to help. Will nodded.

"Good. We need your help. This man, he will just keep killing and we can't afford that. He's terrorizing this village! I've heard of what you can do, and we need you here."

"I'm here, aren't I? Does it look like I'm leaving anytime soon?"

Jack paced the length of the room and circled around Will, who followed him around the room. He gave a pointed look to the already packed bags neatly tucked in a corner. “I don’t know. Are you?”

“No.” Will tried to subdue his posture, the mere presence of Crawford made him feel like he was shrinking. “I’m sorry if I seem off-kilter, but I’ve never felt a presence like this before. I’ve never read or heard of one either.” Will thought back to the spirit that hovered around the scene, born from the sheer emotion of the screams left there, love so strong and twisted that it manifested into existence. “He’s not insensitive or shallow. He feels deeply.”

Crawford sighed and retreated slightly to the corner of the room, leaving the door open as a reward for information, Will guessed. “They told you something. You know something. At the scene, you called it an apology; what is he apologizing for?”

Such sorrow. It wasn’t supposed to feel like this, it wasn’t supposed to be this way: “He couldn’t honor her. He feels regret.”

“Regret? For murdering her after he had already killed seven others? Seems a bit late for that.”

“It does.” This seemed to agitate the Seeker. “Then what in the Void would drive him so mad?”

“He loves them.”

Crawford resumed pacing. He circled closer and closer, traveling horizontally across his periphery. “You said that before. What do you mean he loves them?”

“One of them! He loves one of them,” Will clarified. “And of course, him associating her with the others means he loves them too.”

“There was no semen, there was no -”

“No!” Will yelled. He jerked away from the spirit’s pull at the burst of sheer outrage. Breathing, he slowed his heart and nerves until he could answer more calmly, “He wouldn’t disrespect them that way; he thinks of it as a mercy killing.”

Crawford scoffed. “Mercy?” Will’s face didn’t change, however, so he became thoughtful. “Merciful… He risked capture to tuck her back into bed, to say goodnight.”

Will knew then, with certainty. “There’s going to be another one soon, Seeker Crawford. He knows the hunt is close to its end.”

Seeker Crawford had escorted him to the guards’ barracks and left on his own little adventure shortly after. Apparently the Seekers had taken over the Guard Captain of Red Crossing’s office inside of their base. The office itself was already small, but the Seekers had taken advantage of every bit of the space, spreading notes and sketches across the walls accompanied by a map of southern Orlais. The four of them, Will and the three Seekers, were poring over information and the body with the preservation glyph on it in order to catch this

ruthless murderer. Will felt a little awkward that a spell he usually used to keep food and scrolls from molding was being used on a corpse.

The tallest Seeker with dark, curly hair, who had introduced himself as Brian earlier, was adding notes to a piece of parchment while looking over the body. “So it appears that he strangled her.”

“Obviously,” Seeker Katz responded and was met with a protest, as Seeker Brian muttered something about addressing himself.

“Brian! I found bits of skin under her nails earlier,” the short blonde Seeker yelled as he walked in the room. “Make sure to write that down.” He had introduced himself earlier as well as ‘Seeker James Price, but call me Jimmy’.suicide.

“Probably not,” said Seeker James. “I looked at the hands for a while, and it looked like she was scraping her own palms. Magic also doesn’t work like that anyway.” Ah yes, this one was a former Templar. Of course he would know a bit more about how magic worked. Also

“You think that they're from our guy?” Brian asked and motioned at Will. Will didn’t know what Seeker Brian thought that would accomplish, skin scrapings wouldn’t be enough to track anybody, not like a phylactery, and even if Will was a blood mage (he was not), that magic wouldn’t help here. Also what blood mage would help Seekers by using said magic in front of them. That was : he seemed rather accepting for a Templar. Granted, they had all been rather accepting for Seekers of Truth as well, but Templars tended to be a bit more… strict.

“If what Brian said was true,” Seeker Katz began. “Then odds are we are looking for an herbalist or woodsman of some kind. Not many people know information about reagents, particularly antler velvet.”

Will glanced over at the body that Seeker Brian had moved away from. The spirit hovered in the air, taking on the imprint of Elise. She looked to him, imploring that he find a way to help her. Four antlers, white from a halla, twisted and broke apart before sprouting through her. Distantly, he heard Seeker Brian, “- caused her death was the strangulation. So not gored.”

“We’ve already addressed this: I said ‘like she was gored’. Not that the halla or harts put the wounds there.”

“She was mounted on them; bled dry.” Will intoned, horror rising inside as the comparison to a fresh kill flitted through.

“When I examined her earlier, I noticed that it looked like her liver had been cut out.”

“Wait!” James stopped Brian. “Why take it out if he was just going to put it back in?

Bile came up in Will’s throat, he could almost taste his tongue and acid mingling and burning. “There was something wrong with the meat.”

Seeker Brian looked up, shocked at his assertion and yielding to it all the same, “It’s diseased.” Surely, there were growths on the liver as the Seeker pulled it out; they were small, yet present all the same.

“He’s eating them,” Will spoke to horrified and disgusted Seekers. The implication of exactly where the other bodies had gone lingered in the room like smoke after a fire.

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“Will likes you. Doesn’t think you’ll try anything untowards.”

“And why would I? We all come to the Maker in our own time and we are all his children. He’s a good man,” replied the young sister to Seeker Jack Crawford. Unlike many of her sisters milling around the courtyard of the small Chantry, Sister, formerly Lady, Alana Bloom wore her hair down while in the garden. When she left, she would put it back under the cap and hide it beneath her habit, but the usual frock would just get in the way of her current task. Although it would be nice if she was wearing it now, an additional layer of armor against the Seeker that had barged his way into her morning. It wasn’t often that Alana lost her patience with others, but this man was certainly more frustrating than most.

“You were the one who told us to find him, yes?” the man stated more than asked.

“I did. He needed protection. There were already some quiet rumors about an elf wanderer in The Dales circulating and it wouldn’t be long before someone decided to blame him for the murderers.”

“You were watching him.”

She rolled her eyes, “As much as I hate to say it, when a mage comes into a village, a clearly Dalish one at that, you tend to take notice. At first, I was gauging for a threat… and then I was making sure that no one was going to go after him, because I cared about him. So, yes, I was keeping tabs on him.”

“That’s curious,” Crawford drawled.

“I want to be his friend, and I am his friend.” He hummed at her reply and they rounded the garden once more. A few younger children were weeding the grass and plucking flowers from the beds, fleeing from a Mother who scolded their lackadaisical behavior. There weren’t many flowers left blooming, with Kingsway halfway through. Another month and a half and winter would wipe them all away.

“Strange then. He, a mage, and you, a Chantry sister, as friends. Should you not turn him in to the templars?” he asked. Should she not indeed. When Will arrived in Val Firmin several months ago, hungry and in need of help, but refusing to take any, she had thought about it. He didn’t know that she was a lay sister at first, so it would have been relatively easy. She didn’t though. Alana fed him and brought him to the Chantry (after asking him to hide his more ‘mage-like’ qualities). He wouldn’t step foot inside, even though he was injured, but he did wait for her to collect what she needed to help him. The two quickly grew closer as she helped him with food and supplies, usually accompanied by a local elf to set him at ease,

while he helped by finding murderers for the guards and telling her about unconventional mundane healing practices. It was a pretty good experience, before she was told to leave for Red Crossing. It was good to see him again, even if she wished it could be under better circumstances.

“You are not the first person to ask, and no. I won’t. Will has not done anything to warrant me sending for them and we both know that they can be brutes. Just to make sure that no one got too suspicious, I made sure I wasn’t alone with him in case I was followed.”

“So… you’ve never been alone with him be-”

She interrupted with a jerk of her hand. “It would be inappropriate. Already people wonder about things that don’t concern them, and I don’t want to make his life harder than it is.” She tugged on his arm to have him stop and, noticing the children had now begun to creep closer to listen, pulled him toward the edge of the yard, away from curious little ears. “You do know what he is?” Crawford bowed his head. “Those people, they already deal with enough pain and fear in their lives, controlling their gift or not. People need to fear demons, mages need to fear demons, but… it is a constant fuel for his abilities, just as much as its price.”

“Sister Bloom… Alana. I will make sure he is alright. I wouldn’t ask this of him, if I didn’t think I could help him handle it.” She glared at the larger man, and he felt strangely cowed. “If I didn’t think I could help him the majority of the time.”

“He shouldn’t have to deal with this Jack!”

“He is. Dealing with it. Regardless of what you think, he will always deal with it. I can only do so much, but I need someone who can make sure that he’s not alone when I can’t be there.” His hand told her before his mouth. His fingers clenched on empty air and Alana Bloom knew that Seeker Crawford was a man hellbent on his goal. He was going to take Will, regardless of the consequences. Reminding him of them wouldn’t hurt.

“Jack. Don’t let him lose himself. Don’t let him get too close.”

“He won’t, Alana. I promise, but I am going to need all the help I can afford and he needs to be legitimized if he’s going to be around the Seekers and Templars. I understand that you can’t sponsor him, but do you know someone who can?”

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Two men sat in a library, one crying incessantly while the other glanced at the sun creeping across the horizon. The room was austere, a dark, green-gray paneling lining it, which was largely decorated with red and white velvet drapes by the windows and bookshelves lining the walls. It was a place that, despite the many small statues, beautiful tomes, and delicate paintings, felt sterile.

“Thank you, I’m sorry for the mess. I hate being like this.”

“I understand Lord Froideveaux. As people, we usually only experience such fear in short spates, not prolonged and stretched in the manner that you do. This paranoia you feel is a part

of who you are, unfortunately. I understand that you believe that there is a demon wishing to destroy you."

"Yes."

"There is no demon. If one were plotting to destroy you, it would be far more obvious than this."

"Thank you so much!" the man sniveled. "With everything that has gone on lately, I've been having so much trouble keeping up with the whole problem in Red Crossing. Here I am, supposed to be a lord helping the people, but they're suffering without me!"

Hannibal doubted that very much, but Franklyn was prone to fits of grandeur. Among the many people who came to him for advice, Lord Froideveaux was one of the lesser problems though. For the most part, Comte Lecter found himself apart from his peers; he was 'exotic' (thanks to his Nevarran heritage and Antivan schooling) in the eyes of the Grand Game, which gave him an alien air. He still played the Game, and played it well. Honestly, Antiva tended to have deadlier politics than this place for all it boasted to have some of the most complicated on the continent. Regardless, he had been in Orlais for some time and several minor nobles came to him for advice and patronage in the hopes of an alliance. To add to his foreign aspect, the nobles saw his potential as a connection to other lands, Antiva being one; he had significant interests and land in Nevarra still, as well as connections to the royal family. All of this only added to his appeal. The fact that he didn't seem like a threat allowed him to walk freely among and around them, unless he was at a ball or in the court where everyone was suspicious. Let them think that at least. Franklyn was simply one of many that came to him believing that he would help with their personal issues. "I apologize if I seem rude, but I do have another meeting. I need to make preparations for journeying to Halamshiral this winter."

"Of course!" effused Lord Froideveaux. "I look forward to seeing you at the palace." Wonderful.

Hannibal escorted the man out of his parlor, but as he opened the door to the hall, a man in Seeker armor was waiting. He was dark-skinned, probably of Rivaini descent, and rather large in demeanor and in stature. "Comte Lecter," the man said as he reached to shake Franklyn's hand, "It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Seeker Jack-"

"Excuse me, Ser, but Lord Froideveaux and I were simply concluding our business and I did have another meeting scheduled. If you need to speak with me, I require a moment to cancel."

The Seeker backtracked, but something told Hannibal that this was an act. Curious. "Oh, Your Lordship. Many apologies. I'm, uh, Seeker Jack Crawford with the White Spire. May I come in?"

"If you could wait a moment while I send a messenger to cancel my next meeting," he repeated, slightly irritated. To come unannounced for business and to purposefully test the boundaries of your host… how rude. Unfortunately, a Seeker of Truth would be noticed.

“Of course,” the Seeker replied.

He took his time preparing the parlor for the next guest, making sure everything, including his obsidian mask, was in place. Admittedly, he did simply sit in the chair for a few moments just to make it last a little longer. Eventually, he asked a servant to bring him and a guest some tea before allowing the Seeker into the room. “Please, come in. What business did you have, may I ask? It is very unusual for me to have unannounced visitors.”

Seeker Jack Crawford walked the boundaries of the room before sitting in the chair that Hannibal motioned to, just as the servant walked in with the tea and some small cakes that Hannibal had baked earlier.

“You can ask, but I may have to question you first? The meeting?”

“Taken care of. There will be just you and me.” Seeker Crawford glanced at the servant as she left the room. “Ah, Nesiraya is extremely discreet. She will likely not bother us.” He paid her well and had provided for her family on several occasions as well as training her in the bardic arts. There was a reason she was his spymaster, she owed him her life several times over. The man looked over to the pieces of parchment that detailed several sketches. He had left a surprise there for him, but the Seeker merely glanced at the one on top. He thought the man was observant, but perhaps he should change it to single minded? The focus and perception was there, but only if pointed towards his main objective.

“Are these yours, your Lordship?”

“Of course. This would be the Grand Necropolis. I grew up in Nevarra City and had many opportunities to see it as a boy.” A city of the dead. A wondrous thing, if one got past the moans of the reanimated corpses and the constant smell of decay and preservative.

“Amazing. I know now why the Empress herself requested a portrait from you.” Celene was an admirable woman, and he enjoyed the portrait commissioned by her of her and her ‘servant’ Briala.

“I learned early how to use charcoal to its greatest effect without damaging the pieces. I am curious, however, how this is relevant. Have I caught the ire of Therinfal Redoubt?”

“No, no,” his guest was quick to correct. “I am looking for a patron for a colleague of mine and you were recommended to me by Sister Alana Bloom.”

This was a pleasant turn of events. “Of course! She and I were friends when she still played in the Game, but she was too compassionate for it. Sister Bloom found her calling in the Chantry and I am very happy for her.” Jack nodded sagely and helped himself to a cake and the tea. A Seeker this close in a capacity that was not suspicious was a delightful surprise; he must thank Alana later.

“Yes, she has. She told me about that time and how you were fairly tolerant of magic. I hope this is not too much to ask, but I have a young mage with me that needs a sponsorship if he is to continue working with us and not get grabbed by other Seekers. I can monitor him just fine, but this should legitimize him.”

An interesting proposal. “Could I meet them first?”

They took a trip into the city, where Seeker Crawford escorted him politely into a side room off of the main area of the barracks for guard deployment. This was usually the guard captain’s office, and it amused Hannibal slightly that Crawford had clearly deposed them from their working space. On the way there, Hannibal made sure to play the amazed and ignorant noble, but he sensed that Jack Crawford knew it was an act. Inside the office were names and descriptions scattered across a table, held in place by books and knick knacks. A young man, a curly-haired brunette with strange tattoos on his face in worn leathers and accompanied by a staff that marked him as a mage, stood in the corner farthest from the door and started as they came in, most likely the young man he was meant to observe. “This is Comte Hannibal Lecter,” was the only introduction he received. Hannibal nodded politely at the observer, who offhandedly tipped his head in return. Not quite the reaction he wanted; that could be analyzed later.

“I’m curious, how many people have confessed?” He asked once seated.

“At first, no one. However, apparently the Red Tattler received news of the incident and proceeded to spread confidential details of the affair, thanks to one of the guards,” the Seeker kindly replied to his inquiry.

“Small towns do tend to spread gossip like a flood. It’s no surprise that the guards are not above such things.”

“Tasteless,” growled the young man in the corner, who had gradually gotten closer, almost to the point of politely sitting down with them. Now that he could see him clearly, the young man was an elf, strongly pointed ears having been hidden under brown curls and a scowl. Paired with the face markings, Hannibal deduced that this particular elf was one of the Dalish. Curious that he would be here.

“Do you have problems with taste?”

“My thoughts are often not tasty,” came the retort.

“Nor mine. The barriers are lacking.”

“I build fortresses.”

How amusing. He had not had someone to bounce off of in so long. Here he had thought that Orlais was beginning to bore him.

“Connections come quickly.”

“So do fortresses.”

Curt as well though and he refused to look at him. Very frustrating. “Not fond of eye contact, hmm?”

The elf tensed, bristling, hackles raised and rounded on him. He stared directly into his eyes, defiant at his assertion. “Eyes are distracting, don’t you think? You see too much or there

simply isn't enough. It's hard to focus when all you can do is marvel at how white someone's eyes are or if the color seems off." He jerked his head away, back to staring at the floor in front of him. "I try to avoid eyes whenever possible. Jack?"

Well, he was not about to be dismissed. Those eyes that had glared into his were brilliantly blue and water-like in their adaptability, he just knew. It would be such fun to play off of him, to play with him. But how to keep his interest? "I imagine what you see touches everything else in your mind." The young elf turned towards him, ready to spit out his response, so Hannibal continued without giving him the chance.

"Your values and decency are present, but shocked at the connections that you so profoundly and profusely make. Appalled at where the Fade takes you." The eyes met his again. They were wide and wet. Horror evident behind them. Those eyes were beautiful and emotive; he wanted to pluck them out and keep them.

"No fortresses in the bone arena of your skull to protect those you cherish."

"Who are you consulting for?" the first question came out, hushed and rushed. "Jack! Who is he meant to be consulting for?" he yelled and the Seeker made immediate efforts to calm the young man, evidently named Will, to no avail.

"I apologize, Will, but I was taught to observe. I cannot simply ignore what is in front of me than you can ignore the pull of magic and your abilities." Will recoiled and backed away from the both of them, before rushing from the room. "I need to check on my hounds," he excused as he ran.

"Comte Lecter… Perhaps it would be better if we did not push him so much. He is not used to humans and the way that the Chantry does things; I'd rather not scare him off."

"Seeker Crawford," Hannibal began. "I don't believe you understand the gravity of the situation. He is a very sensitive young man and is strongly empathetic. That attracts not only spirits to him. He will face far worse from demons and will need far more to keep him grounded." Here, he paused for effect and made it appear as if his next suggestion was a great burden. Better not to seem too eager. "You needn't worry that this will prevent me from sponsoring him. I would be willing to help young Will see our cannibal and keep his head. This is far too important for someone not to."

Oh the places they'd go.

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The scene that he walked to was a gruesome one. A halla's head sat in a field, the white downy fur stained with blood and dirt. Its antlers had been broken apart and twisted to make a place for a corpse jammed on top of it. On it, a young, naked woman that fit the exact same description of the eight missing girls. Ravens flitted around the area, and Will almost felt like they were circling him, whispering to him: a secret only he could here. He would need to pray tonight, with a sign like this. He crouched near the body, gazing at it.

"The Halla head was reported stolen last night, from a farm fairly close by."

It seemed so surreal. “Just the head?”

“The guards have already made a statement. They’ve decided to call him the Red Crossing Shrike.”

“Shrike?” Will asked, unfamiliar with the name.

The shorter of the two men, James, that he had met previously piped up. “It’s a perching bird. It impales its prey on little thorny branches and rips their organs out for later.” His taller friend Brian made a face of disgust, which seemed incongruous with the theater before him.

“I can’t tell whether it’s sloppy or shrewd,” came Seeker Crawford’s voice from behind him. The setting before him had distracted him with what had taken his attention until this moment. He turned his face towards the tall man and stated the obvious, “He wanted her found this way. This is mockery.”

“Oh whom?” asked James.

“Her? Or maybe us?”

“All of his love.. Gone so quickly.”

“This isn’t the same person, Seeker.”

Seeker Brian approached the halla and woman, but did not dare get too close. He motioned vaguely to her torso, while saying, “He took her lungs. If what I think killed her is right, she was still alive when he did it.”

“He loves them, Seeker Crawford. He doesn’t want to hurt them to torture them! He wants them to stay with him, inside, forever. This killer is different, he thought of her as a swine.” Will trembled with the force of the spirit he could sense manifesting there, clinging to him like sweat. It was so abstract; he couldn’t fathom its identity, but it was not the all-consuming and toxic love from before, on the verge of demonic energy. No. This was something so in-between, balancing a nature that encompassed spirits and demons. He needed to get away or be swept up in it.

“This is someone else?” someone asked and he stood up, attempting to flee the area.

“The cannibal that killed the Nichols girl had a place to do it and no interest in this drama!” He yelled and the spirit that had followed him after Elise’s scene raged at the idea of this disrespect. “He has a house, maybe even two, something with antlers scattered throughout!” The love burned and became wrath at this theater and he knew. “He has a daughter. She looks just like the other girls, to him is just like the other girls.” What could cause such a love to become so bitter? “She is his only child. She’s leaving home soon or will be leaving home. He can’t bear the thought…. That’s who we should be looking for.” Will got up to leave, trying to get away from the presence that was there, as the spirit following for Elise calmed and left, knowing it’s job was done.

“What about this one?” Seeker Crawford asked, approaching WIll as he left to stop him.

“A murderer with a taste for pain, but enough wisdom to keep from getting caught. They’re notoriously difficult to catch. Oftentimes their reasons are so obscure and their kills so random that people will think they are different murderers. I likely won’t be able to help you, Ser, and he may never kill this way again.”

The rest of the day passed by quickly enough with the group discussing more in Guard-Captain’s office. Crawford had taken him to the side and after a brief discussion where he had to explain that ‘yes, he was trained in how to use a bow’ and ‘yes, he could take care of himself without magic’, the man dropped it. The Seeker had handed him a crossbow and wished him safety for the night, dismissing him for his uselessness of the moment. He had gladly left for the inn at the end of the day, tired but still reluctant to go back into the Fade. Sleep was rarely a peace for him, as demons and spirits alike lurked at the edges of dreams. The second skin spirit felt like it lingered, even if he couldn’t feel its presence.

It was a relief when sunlight came. Just as he was really waking up, however, a swift knocking woke him fully. Wonderful, it was probably Seeker Crawford again. He approached the door, still in his sleep-clothes, hoping to make a point about invasion of privacy. When he opened it, however, he was met with the face of his new ‘sponsor’ (according to the head of the Seeker group) Comte Lecter.

“Good morning Will. May I come in?” It was a surprise and not a pleasant one. “Where’s Crawford?” Will asked, irritated by the early morning interruption.

“Unfortunately, he has been summoned to a meeting with the Guard Captain about use of the space in the barracks. As your sponsor, I have been asked to accompany you. May I come in?” Will grumbled at the man before moving aside and allowing him in the room. An elf with dark hair pulled up in a bun walked in behind him, carrying two plates and a small container of food and some wine and set them on the small table by the window. She raised an eyebrow at him before swiftly leaving the room. “Do not mind Nesiraya. She can be rather protective, but she means well.” In a move rather unlike most nobles, his Lordship began plating up the food from the container, artfully arranging it on the plate. “ I apologize for my presumption, but I find that inn-and-tavern fare tends to be bland and unappealing. I usually prepare my own meals and am very careful about its contents. I thought that you could do with such a meal.” The noble sat in one of the chairs at the table and gestured for Will to do the same. Will did, of course, but only after circling around the man to get to the chair.

It was silent for a moment as both men began to eat. It was nice, especially since Will was used to ‘tavern fare’ or the kind of rations and dried food that one could get on the road. The meal was a scramble. The eggs and vegetables tasted fresh and the meat was free from the over-salted taste that jerky and preserved venison have. “It’s delicious, thank you.”

“My pleasure,” the Comte said, smiling slightly. He took a bite, and it was then that Will realized, self-consciously, that his Lordship had been watching him eat. It was rather… odd and made him realize that he was still in his sleep-clothes. Luckily, his covered quite a bit, but it was still unseemly. He tucked back into the food and attempted to squash down the slight bit of nerves that had crept up.

“I would apologize for my behavior yesterday, but I’ve already apologized once and will certainly be apologizing again. Eventually, they will seem hollow to you, so I need to use

them sparingly." A flare of annoyance sparked up.

"Just keep it professional, your Lordship." This only seemed to amuse the man, which only made him more annoyed.

"Or we could behave like adults. Peers, even. Maker forbid that we become friendly."

Friendly? With a noble, an Orlesian noble even? Will thought not. The man may not sound like he was originally from Orlais, but that was where he had power. Where there was power, there was the Orlesian Grand Game, and Will wanted no part of it.

"I don't find you interesting."

"You will," Comte Lecter said and resumed eating for a moment. Presumptive, ugh. "Seeker Crawford tells me you have a knack for the monsters." Will set down his fork. It seemed like now was the time to examine just how helpful this man would be.

"I don't believe the Shrike killed the girl in the field."

"What gave it away for you?"

Will breathed out, "Everything," before realizing that it probably wouldn't be enough of an explanation. "The air around it, the Fade spilling in, it was like this killer was a false reflection, a shadow. He had to show how bad it could have been to fully understand the love that was put into the originals. The spirits waited there, just for me."

"People can be so strange, so unpredictable. I don't know much about the spirits, but not many people do what you do. Do they show you his dreams? His fears? What kind of problems torment him?"

"More than a few," Will retorted. The man admitted to not knowing how spirits worked, he doubted his Lordship would be much help beyond an excuse for Will to go places.

"And you? Do you ever have any problems Will?"

Such a silly question. "No," he managed to whisper out.

"Of course you don't. You and I are the same. Nothing about us to feel awful about." That seemed a bit like stretching the point, but Will allowed him to continue.

"You know Will, I think our dear Uncle Jack sees you as a fragile little teacup. The finest antique used for the most special of guests." With this, Will chuckles, amused at the mental image of the scenario and of the fairly astute observation. "How do you see me?" he asked, amusement giving his nerves a high.

"The courser I wish to have near the house, when the Dread Wolf lurks nearby."

Will scrutinized the man, not sure what to say. It wasn't common for an Orlesian, let alone a noble, to know anything about Dalish culture. The Dread Wolf and ways to ward him off

wasn't exactly something that he imagined them being concerned with if one had taken an interest.

"Finish your breakfast."

Will left with the Comte, not at all comfortable with the situation at hand. Nobles are kind of pompous asses and usually treat him like dirt or worse, but this one was quiet and smiling pleasantly at everything that passed by the cart, whether it was a patch of flowers or a heap of shit. He had a few choice words that he had been considering, but it really wouldn't do to scare this one too quickly. Seeker Crawford wouldn't like it after all of the effort he put in to find a 'sponsor'. "What are you smiling at?" Will demanded, perhaps a little harsher than he should have.

"I am simply enjoying this newfound source of knowledge. The Seekers are an elusive bunch and it's interesting to learn what they do when they are not condemning mages and templars alike." Will had actually asked Seeker Crawford why he bothered with a situation if it didn't involve either of those parties. It had gotten him a dead look, which clearly portrayed a combination of "Would you dare condemn these people in this manner?" and "The guards are useless." Will was wise enough to leave it at that. Will slowed the cart as they approached the town's apothecary. It was a decently sized establishment with a detached building and a hearth. The people probably made good money considering the hustle and bustle it found itself in with a merchant caravan pulling off.

"This will probably be rather boring; we're just asking a few questions and then we'll be on our way."

"Why did they send you? You're a mage." Will thought this was a great question and, unfortunately, he knew the answer. "No one else could be spared today and that's why Jack apparently asked for you to come along. I need a chaperone." It was almost like he was a child again, surrounded by age mates getting their vallaslin and no one willing to let him venture off.

"Hmm," his unwelcome companion contemplated his reasoning. "What are we looking for then?"

"Anything odd I guess. This is a relatively small town, smaller than Velun anyway. Most people will know if something's fishy or dubious." Will exited the cart and tied the horses to the post before motioning for the Comte to follow him.

They entered the shop together where a young woman was manning a station near the front and sorting herbs. She looked up, very briefly following Comte Lecter with her eyes, but overall disinterested in anything except for her work. "Can I help you gentlemen?"

"Yes," Will answered and she finally looked at him. Her demeanor changed, looking a cross between suspicious and anticipatory. His Dalish attire must have set her off and now she wondered if he was a potential threat or a knowledgeable client. Strangely, the wariness she exhibited was far more hospitable than the Innkeeper was this morning before she realized that he was the one the Seekers had bought the room for. He could tell that if it wasn't a

Chantry organization that had paid for the room and reserved it specifically for him, then she would have kicked him out.

“We’re looking for an apothecary, not someone formally trained. Someone specifically comfortable with forest-based remedies of non-herbal means.” The shopkeep raised an eyebrow and Will hurried to pull out the paper that Jack had given him before he left. “Sorry, we’re with the Chantry,” he said as he handed it off to her. After a moment of reading it and some glances to his face to confirm that yes, he was a Dalish elf, and yes, he was helping the Chantry, she handed it back. She nodded carefully and went to the back behind the counter to rummage through her paperwork. WIll took the chance and looked around the room where the different dried herbs hung from the ceiling and plants grew like ivy along the walls and in pots lined on shelves. He could pick out everything from felandris to blood lotus to elfroot; it was very well stocked. He heard whispers from the back where she was muttering to someone, who seemed either curious or concerned.

She came back and handed him some parchment with a list of names and directions to homes around it. Each of the names had specialties on them: healer, alchemist, herbalist, apothecary, etc. “This is a list of our suppliers and the people that work in the shop. We have a few full-time people such as myself, but most of them work seasonally.”

He glanced through the list. “Garrett Hobbs?”

“He’s an herbalist, not an apothecary. I suppose, occasionally he brings in a few remedies.”

He felt drawn to the name. It felt right. “Does Messere Hobbs have a daughter?”

“Maybe. I don’t know honestly, I don’t speak much with the seasonals,” she snapped, clearly irritated at being away from her work now that he wasn’t a customer.

“What’s so odd about Messere Hobbs?” Will started at the voice behind him, having forgotten that he was accompanied by the noble.

“He didn’t leave an address. Everyone else did,” Will replied as he stepped around the man that had suddenly gotten very close to him. He directed his next question to the clearly frustrated herbalist. “Could I get an address for Messere Hobbs and any other information about his dealings in the past?”

She rolled her eyes and swiftly turned to glide her way back to the back rooms. After a few minutes she brought a few books with transactions with the different herbalists over several years as well as several sheets of parchment with sales. Both men grabbed some and as they left; Will mentioned in passing that he was going to speak with Garrett Hobbs before they returned to the barracks. They had some trouble getting everything back into the cart as Comte Lecter dropped the paperwork several times, leaving Will and the apothecary’s employee to pick them up. Admittedly it was frustrating; he understood how the Comte would be unused to labor, but this was ridiculous. Despite interruptions, they eventually headed on their way.

Will stared at the house, blue sky behind it blurring out of focus. There was blood sticking to the rocks that sat in front of the doorway. His hands itched, so he scratched them and came away with flakes of blood sticking out from under his nails. He was keenly aware of its presence. There was bile coating the sides of his throat so thick that it was cutting off the air. Wouldn't it be nice to remember what breathing felt like?

The bustle flowed around him. The Seekers and guards were trying to stabilize the situation and calm those that went to get help during the incident. An older mage that had been in town had been called by the poor neighbor he had startled and helped the girl. She was lucky to be alive.

He absently stared as the space across from him became a shape. A halla, but black as night, corrupted in ash and soot and adorned with ravens' feathers. Ghilan'nain. Dirthamen.

They sat together in the cart, Will having maintained his desire for a quick stop near the Hobbs' home. It was a small homely building, clearly the mark of a small business worker: he and his wife made enough money for his family to live comfortably. Will exited the cart and walked over to the front door, which quickly burst open as a man, presumably Messere Hobbs, shoved his wife through. Will dashed forward as he saw the blood and tried desperately to staunch the flow from her neck which was pouring onto his hands. He saw a woman out of the corner of his eye and screamed, "Get help!" before rushing into the building.

He pulled out the crossbow that he was given and notched a bolt as he rounded the corner of the hall into a kitchen. The man had a young girl, a girl that looked so similar to the ones that WIll had been seeing the past few days. She was whimpering, her blue eyes (blue, the others were brown) brimming with tears and fear as she tried to push him off.

"Garrett Hobbs! Stop!" Will yelled. "I'm with the Seekers!"

This seemed to spur him into action. The man's arm tensed and Will felt the world slow. He released the bolt, aiming to disable. It lodged in his shoulder, hitting an artery with the sheer amount of spray. The man dropped the girl, but he was still going. Bleeding out as he was, he was still going.

Will clumsily had been trying to notch another arrow, and just barely managed to push the man back. He was still going. Years of training took over and Will concentrated, sending out a burst of energy in all directions. The girl was already on the ground, it wouldn't do anything to her. The man was knocked back, but Will could still see him getting ready to pounce… so he crushed him.

The prison came from the air and began pressing Garrett Hobbs into the floor, crushing him. The man wasn't moving. Confident that he was taken care of, Will dashed to the girl on the floor. He began trying rudimentary non-magical healing; it was a branch he had never really bothered with spell-wise. He was coming to regret it now.

“No,” he whispered. “No. No. No. No.” He clutched at her neck, willing the wound to close, but nothing would happen. He heard a faint choking chuckle to his left and looked to where Garrett Hobbs was laying prone, unable to breath.

“See?” he gurgled and choked through collapsing lungs. “See?” He died with a smile of triumph on his face.

Will returned concentration to the bleeding girl, who he now realized had seen him die, watched his pain. His hands were slipping and trembling and he tried to hold her blood in. He was shaking too much, he wouldn’t be able to help her if he couldn’t get a hold of himself.

A gentle hand took hold of his and began to push it away, he grabbed tighter in retaliation, but the hand did not relent. He relaxed when he saw that the much steadier hand was taking his place and looked up to see that Comte Lecter was currently holding the girl’s life in his hands. He was protecting her when Will couldn’t.

The screams still clung to the air and choked him as he swayed in place. Distantly, he watched as Comte Lecter helped escort the young woman to the cart, now that another mage, one actually with the Circle and the Chantry, had made it safe for her to move. The halla was gone, had been gone for a while. Everyone was leaving. Everyone had left. It was only him and the dead.

_-_-_-_-_

He had never been in a Chantry before.

Will had told her that once, during their many meetings. Every time that he visited her or she saw him, it was usually outside of the building doing charity work. He had told her that even outside the walls felt like they were closing in and the humans and even elves that worshiped the Maker always stared at him. The humans in disdain, the elves in confusion (and even disappointment, sometimes). The foyer was filled with candles that climbed the walls in their holders. Sister Bloom was near the entrance at the time and she glanced over as soon as the doors opened. That was when Will tentatively stepped in and was thrown into the candles’ glow by whatever purpose he had there. She could easily hazard a guess.

She continued to light the candles as he passed by her with barely a glance in her direction. He always greeted her when they crossed paths, but this time he had a mind for the one area of the Chantry he felt that he needed to go.

The Red Crossing Chantry was unique; it had a small clinic attached to it in the hopes that the poor in the town would have a place to go. She had insisted on it as soon as she arrived there, pleading with the Mother to allow a place where people could have their ills cured without fear of payment. It was tiny and not very well stocked, but it was something. Will was heading to a room there, where a visiting mage from one of the Circles had been working tirelessly with healing magic to keep young Abigail Hobbs alive. She had been healed completely after many long hours into the night.

They were very lucky that he was there. Healing magic was something rarer and rarer these days and it wasn’t like Circles were usually nearby.

Alana followed at a distance through the hallways and the main room of the clinic, all the way to the area where the sick rooms were. She quietly watched Will enter the room in a trance, where Abigail Hobbs' first visitor sat, sleeping quietly. Hannibal had arrived with the girl, having been the one to oversee her transport with Will "indisposed". No one bothered to explain to her what they meant by that. He had stayed at her side all night, constantly seeing to any health needs and speaking with the mage about what could be improved. She had forgotten that he had a strong sense of magical theory, thanks to youthful pursuits and proximity to the Mortalitasi.

She watched as Will hesitated at the entry point to Abigail's room. It was less of a door and more of a thin curtain at this point, an illusion of privacy; each of the sick rooms needed to be easily accessible for a healer and a door was just one more barrier. The room was largely barren, as no one had yet brought any clothes or belongings for the girl, except for the bed where she laid, a small cot in the corner, a chair that contained her noble friend, and a table on which sat a few potions, poultices, and salves to apply as necessary; it was a task that Hannibal had taken with much severity.

Will brought the cot from where it sat near the wall opposite the Comte and tried to move it near the bed as quietly as possible. It scraped a few times, but Hannibal did not stir. Through the gossamer curtain, Alana could see Will sit down and carefully observe the people he was occupying the room with, particularly where Hannibal held the poor girl's hand. He did not move to grab the other, but Alana could tell he wanted to.

The quiet opening and closing of the door at the other end of the chapel alerted Alana to another person arriving. She was the Sister on duty at the moment and needed to be available for whatever lost soul entered. When she left the little clinic to see who it was, she grimaced. It wasn't a lost soul at all, but the Seeker of Truth Jack Crawford striding through the room with purpose.

Rage filled her, rather unbecoming for a Chantry Sister, as she drove through the air in front of her to stand, resolute, against Jack Crawford.

"Where's Will?" he asked and her indignation rose.

She had to fight to not spit and hurl curses for hurting her friend, for allowing him to face this. If she spoke, it would be to fling abuse at this presumptive man. She could barely get the words out of her mouth, because she knew if she spoke more she would not be able to contain herself.

"You said he wouldn't get too close," and she walked away, unable to face him for any longer.

Behind her, Jack Crawford looked towards the room Alana had walked away from, seeing the figures' outlines just barely thanks to the dying candlelight. He stood there for a moment, face neutral as he contemplated the young man and the sleeping girl. Then, he turned away and left them to rest.

Ma ghilana mir din'an

Chapter Summary

> "Men's hearts hold shadows darker than any tainted creature." -Flemeth, Dragon Age: Origins

Chapter Notes

> 09/14/24: Edited! Another chapter taken care, several more to go. It's kind of wild to see these notes; it feels a bit like a time capsule. So, I've decided to largely leave the original notes from here on with some mild edits for things that no longer apply.
>
> New chapter! I'll admit that I feel better about this while editing than I did when I originally wrote it. I especially found myself enjoying writing Freddie's headspace, but there's another character that I wrote later (see next chapter) whose headspace I enjoyed much more. I kind of hate writing in Hannibal's headspace, he's extremely stubborn and vague right now when Will is just a curiosity. I'm hoping this improves later.
>
> I also lost my beta, so if anyone would like to take up the position, please let me know. She admitted that she wasn't able to make time to go through the chapters and edit, so I've doing it myself. Let me know if you see anything I missed.
>
> Elvhen translations at the bottom!
>
> Ma ghilana mir din'an: Guide me into death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will sighed, frustrated at the damn crossbow in his hand. The bolt had gone askew and jammed the locking mechanism; it was driving him nuts. He removed the bolt and restrung the crossbow back into place. Loading it once more, he prayed to Andruil that this one would hit its mark. He was much more comfortable with short bows; they relied on the skill of the wielder rather than a silly trigger, and he had grown up around them. Unfortunately, they were terrible at close range.

He raised it back up to the stump that he had been practicing on and this time it hit, but the bolt was slightly off center. He needed to improve. He reloaded, but as he looked back up, sitting on the stump was Garrett Hobbs. He stared with pale, dead eyes back at Will, film coating them and dripping mucus down the cheeks. The withered skin was hanging off the frame and peeling away from his form, slowly. Bit by bit, he was falling apart, and he stood

from the stump, shambling forward towards Will. Black tar poured from his mouth as he said, "You liked it. You know it. You failed to save her. I can help you save her." Each step echoed on the forest floor, creating an unnatural cracking sound. "See?" Another step… then another. They had become strangely rhythmic. "See?" The steps became faster and faster as he advanced and then they were outside.

Seeker Crawford was knocking on the side of the cart that he had fallen asleep in. Garrett Hobbs' presence in this place was apparently strong enough that a demon had decided to take his form, Will couldn't tell what kind; he could only hope that it wouldn't follow him elsewhere.

The dreams and headaches had been getting worse as of late, ever since he had killed Hobbs. Perhaps, when he left and put this place far behind him, they would bother him less.

He could hope.

The Seeker peered into the back of the cart and raised an eyebrow at him. "We're here." He peeled himself off the floor of the cart and made his way over to the cabin that they had discovered.

In addition to the expected table reserved for creating remedies, the main room was filled with antlers, primarily hart. It soothed something small inside him to know that Messere Hobbs didn't make a habit of hunting halla, but he knew it was irrational. Hobbs' prey were people and that was far worse a crime.

"For an herbalist that aspired to be an apothecary, Messere Hobbs was quite the prolific hunter," Will stated.

"Odd, I know. I'm surprised he had the time. Hopefully we can use what we learn here to catch others like him."

"You mean you can, Seeker Crawford," Will helpfully reminded. Or not so helpfully, as it were.

Crawford glared at him from across the room. "We need you, Will. I can protect you **if** I can continue to have you with me." If. Will scrunched his nose in irritation. "I'm not threatening you. I won't turn you in just because you refuse, but I won't be able to protect you." An interesting proposition and something that he didn't really trust. He would be working for Crawford and so long as he did, he would be protected, but Dreaming wasn't exactly safe. He would still be in plenty of danger.

"Also," and somehow the Seeker sounded gruffer. "You can call me Jack. Everyone on my team does, and you're a part of it now." Will looked away, a strange feeling welling up something. It was something cloying, like sadness or anxiety, and it softened away the jagged edges of his distrust.

The Seeker, Jack, glanced around the area before turning back to Will. “I admit I was hoping to find bodies. There are seven that are still missing.”

“He would have eaten them, wouldn’t he?” It seemed obvious given what they knew about Hobbs.

“Had to be some parts that he wasn’t eating.”

“You know as well as I that **that** isn’t always the case.”

Jack moved around one of the supports and out of sight, his face just barely visible through the forest of antlers between them. “It’s a lot of work Will, especially for someone to do alone. He has to find them, track them, kill them, and prepare them. He has to do all this without leaving a single bit of evidence of his passing.”

Will walked around the antlers, picking his way through them. They were sharp and protruding, so he needed to be so very careful. “You suspect he had someone he hunted with?”

“Perhaps,” Crawford replied through the barricade. “Someone who is barely alive. Someone who he also hunted with.”

“You think Abigail helped him?”

He nodded, “The rest of the team has been asking around, speaking with the locals and neighbors. Apparently he was teaching his daughter the tools of the trade, both hunting and herbalism. Spent a lot of time up here together. Alone.”

The air clogged his throat and a shiver of dread went up his spine. Will knew what Jack was going to say even before the man may have thought it.

“She would make the ideal bait, wouldn’t she?”

Will looked away, keeping Crawford in the corner of his eye. He couldn’t afford to look at him right now. Why did it feel like it was him Jack Crawford was judging instead of the girl he had saved yesterday? It was bone deep within him, Abigail couldn’t be guilty. To think it felt like some kind of blasphemy.

“Hobbs killed alone,” he said and rejected any thought that might say otherwise.

The Seekers continued their investigation into where the bodies were, and Will… Will decided to stay. To help. Unfortunately, the spirits did not share his sentiment and were no longer helpful. Every time that he pushed through the Veil or fell asleep, he saw Garrett Hobbs. The demon wearing the man’s face always stared and smiled at him, asking him the same thing over and over: “See? See?” Jack had become frustrated with Will’s lack of progress and sent him off.

It did smooth away a few more of the spikes of distrust Will felt. He had been so worried that the moment he would be unable to produce any results using his abilities, Jack would kick him to the curb. All he did instead was have Will come in, see what he could do, and if he

wasn't contributing to the discussion for the day, he sent Will out. Jack didn't threaten him, hide his dogs, stop paying for him at the inn, lock him up, or any number of unpleasant things he could do. No, Jack just did the same things he did when Jimmy could only tell Jack that there was nothing he could tell him through Templar training or when Brian's alchemy skills wouldn't be of any use.

It didn't stop Will from feeling anxious and useless. His Keeper had always made a point about idle hands being detrimental to the Clan and there had been rarely any moments with the Avvar where he hadn't found himself doing something productive around the Hold. Once he was on his own, it was impossible to spend a single second standing still. For the first time in his memory, Will had the ability to do nothing.

To keep himself from tearing out his own hair, Will had taken to helping out the apothecary. It was good work and quiet. Well, it was almost quiet. Unfortunately over the last couple of days, word over what had happened at the Hobbs' house had spread around, which included his part in it. This morning, when he walked in, Eloise (the woman at the counter) had slow clapped as he walked in and he had to hush her. It felt like a wound was being poked and split open. At least she wasn't upset over him killing one of her suppliers. It was an illogical worry, but that didn't mean it wasn't still there. To take his mind off things, he was sorting the roots from the weeds that a local herbalist had brought in. The herbalist had to have been the worst kind of amateur; over two-thirds of his 'herbs' were useless kinds of grass or maimed beyond use.

He was grateful when Alana interrupted his morning. She made sure to check on him whenever she saw him in the Chantry (and he was also grateful that she never asked why he had decided to go inside instead of keeping a twenty foot distance from the building), but he hadn't seen her outside of the building since back when they were both in Val Firmin. Her kind and genuine nature made every moment speaking with her a pleasure, so he wasn't complaining. Still, Will often worried that she saw him more as a charge than a friend.
"Hello," Will greeted her, broad smiling despite the soft tone.

"How are you, Will?" she smiled back with her lips, but her eyes held a tinge of anger. It was unsettling. Sister Alana Bloom had never struck him as a wrathful person, but there lied a hint of righteous indignance in her gaze, he only hoped that his instinct was right and it wasn't meant for him.

Will wasn't quite sure what the best approach would be for answering her question while she was upset, but he settled on being honest. "I have no idea."

"That may change," she said quickly. "I didn't want you to be ambushed-"

He frowned and cut her off. "This is an ambush?"

She began to speak faster. "Ambush is later. Immediately later. Soon to now."

The door opened behind her. "When Jack arrives, consider yourself ambushed."

Jack stepped through the doorway and peered around Alana. "Hello Jack," he greeted, trying to warn Alana who just stepped in.

“How has your day been?”

“Eloise applauded,” the person in question glanced up from her own work once she heard her voice. He playfully frowned at her, “It was inappropriate.” She smirked back at him, before returning to her sorting.

“Well,” Jack began. “Thanks to your work, I received permission to welcome you on a more long-term basis, straight from the Lady Seeker herself.” Great. Now the Lady Seeker knew who and where Will was. It wasn’t like they were looking for him specifically, but it wasn’t an encouraging thought.

“Here is the thing,” Alana said. “Do you want to continue to work with the Seekers?”

Jack side-eyed the Sister. “I want him to work with us, but I’m going to have to recommend some sort of accountability. He’ll also need a sponsorship.” She scoffed, clearly not taking in a word he said.

“Accountability?” Will asked, hesitant. “Sponsorship?”

Alana looked to him, attempting to soften her face from any rage at Jack and make it comforting to him. “In a situation like this, templars would interact with the ‘court mage’ to make sure that they are doing well. At the same time, the sponsor would evaluate their charge and see if they felt it was worth continuing their relationship.”

“Court mage?” he hoped his confusion and incredulity came across, because what the fuck.

Out of the corner of his eye, Will saw Jack shoo Eloise out of the room. Vaguely he thought about how this was her business, but he didn’t feel like arguing with the much larger man. It wasn’t worth the effort. “It was the only way that we could get you with us on paper. You know how the Chantry likes their bureaucracy,” Alana continued. “Essentially they put paperwork into place that considers you a ward of the Seekers for the time being so that you don’t get carted off to the Circle. They had co-signed a noble to give you legitimacy for the last few weeks, but that was considered a temporary arrangement for an immediate need. If this were Ferelden or the Free Marches, they might have gone through the whole process anyway, but so long as a mage is sponsored… apostate or not, with enough money and clout no one will bother you.”

“So what does this mean?”

Jack returned. “What this means is that I need you to speak with your sponsor on a regular basis. I know you won’t open up to the Templars and, by extension, Seekers; the Chantry is out of the question. If I put you even near a Circle, you might renege on any agreement that we have.”

“Would it be with-?” Will gestured vaguely at Alana.

“Unfortunately not,” she replied. “The Chantry would disavow me if I didn’t get you sent to a Circle. Besides, I’m a bit too close to you to give you an accurate assessment of your

feelings.” Not that anyone really could. This whole exercise was pointless. Asking him about his feelings? What did that have to do with anything?

“And my **sponsor** is?” Will spat.

“What about Comte Lecter?” Alana suggested. “He was there with you; he would have to understand your feelings.” Speaking to a noble? Dread Wolf take him, but that sounded like the most ridiculous idea ever. However, Will was interrupted before he could argue.

“Have you killed before, Will?” Jack asked. Both Will and Alana were taken aback.

“I’ve fought plenty of times to protect myself and others, Jack. I have lived in the forest for most of my life.”

“That’s not what I asked. Or what I meant, rather. Have you killed another person before?”

It felt like a damnation. The word barely came out of his mouth, but he felt it would be worse if he couldn’t even say that much. “No.”

“No,” Jack repeated, nodding his head. He whirled around at Will, getting into his space. “Will! You need to speak with someone. Unless you want it to be me-” Creators no! He liked Seeker Crawford well enough, but not for this. “Then you need to get your act together. How many nights have you spent in Abigail Hobbs’ room?”

Alana had the decency to look uncomfortable. “Just speak to his Lordship; there is no harm in trying.”

Will approached the door with some trepidation. Inside was **his Lordship** and just the thought made him want to vomit. He glanced over to the window and looked at the night. A clatter came from his right and he saw that the candle clock indicated that it was the appropriate time. He knocked softly and waited.

The door creaked open, presenting the man in question. He was wearing gray high-waisted breeches that had black stripes running down the sides and charcoal high collared doublet with a subtle plaid inlaid into the fabric. Last time Will saw the man, he seemed Orlesian to the extreme, with the exception of wearing a mask. Today, the decoration and print were blatantly Nevarran fashion despite the actual clothing tailored in the Orlesian style; the Comte was throwing his heritage in the face of those that saw him. His lack of mask seemed less like a simple personal choice and more of a challenge. “Good evening, please come in.”

Will entered; what else could he do? Of course, he tried to get as far away from the man as possible, immediately finding a ladder that led to the walkways surrounding the room. He followed the walls and railings as they held shelves for the grand library. Well, to a noble it was a study albeit one with two floors. While searching, he admitted to himself that perhaps he was being a bit harsh. The titles that he saw as he picked his way through were interesting and, more importantly, well-worn: *The Noladar Anthology of Dwarven Poetry* , Brother Genitivi’s *Tales of the Destruction of Thedas* and even the *Maleficar Imperio* . Behind him he

could hear the Comte rustling with parchment on the large desk. “Will,” came the Comte’s voice.

Will turned and looked down at the man. Standing, Comte Lecter held a piece of parchment was being held up to the light where the contents could be plainly seen even from Will’s distance. There was a large signature on the bottom accompanied by a wax seal of a skull wrapped with intertwining ribbons.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“My agreement to be your sponsor,” was the reply.

Really? Without any thought really put into it? “Just like that?”

“Of course,” said his Lordship. “Seeker Crawford may rest easy, knowing that you are sponsored and well within his reach instead of in the Circle. This means that we may speak without the headsman’s ax that is paperwork.” Will came down the ladder to approach this strange man that he was suddenly paired with. His Lordship held the parchment out in front of him, dangling it between his fingers. Will gently took the paper from his hand and swiftly rolled it up, before moving away slowly to put it in his pack. He highly doubted the man was going to bite him, but Will didn’t want to take the chance that he could snatch the slip back, this whole thing having been a ploy to get Will to walk in reach.

After it was carefully stored, he turned back to Comte Lecter. “Why are you doing this?”

The man somehow managed to convey a shrug without moving an inch. “I have always been fascinated by the minds of individuals and have even done some studying of my own. Many nobles come to me in hopes to ease their woes without Chantry involvement. I believe I may be able to help you.” Part of Will thought that maybe the Comte saw him as another project and another thought he might be genuine. He didn’t know which he preferred.

“Of course, I don’t know exactly how much I can help you,” his Lordship continued. “Your relationship to the Fade has taught you to fortify your mind and my brand of help requires you to open to me.”

“And if I can’t be open?” Will challenged. The man approached, circling around the desk to where a pair of soft sitting chairs were set. Will carefully skirted around the area, keeping to the opposite side of the circle. The human had been trying to get closer, and with the rough day that he had been having, Will didn’t quite feel like sharing his space.

“I may not be able to help your mind,” Lecter began. “However, Jack Crawford sends you to many a dark place, which could leave you open to demons. Allow me to be your guide; allow me to bring you back from them so demons may not tempt you.”

He scoffed, “A little too late, your Lordship. The darkness of those places clings to me like tar. The last time he sent me in, I brought something back, stuck.”

“A daughter?” Abigail Hobbs. He had been staying every single night in her room since the incident, praying to the Creators to allow her to wake. It had been strange, caring for

someone in this manner, hoping to be able to call her da'len. She was too old for the endearment, but that didn't mean it didn't feel right. He wasn't her dad though, couldn't be. He killed her dad.

And the Comte was a little wrong as well, but he needed that sponsorship for the time being. Best play nice.

"You saved Abigail's life and you orphaned her. It comes with a certain emotional responsibility."

The accusation of it felt too deep. "You were there too," he said. "You saved her. Do you feel obligated?"

"Immensely. There are many times that I fantasized about scenarios where my actions may have allowed a different fate for her." The vulnerability of that statement threw him off. He should have expected it through, given what he witnessed after killing Hobbs. It is a rare person who can hold a girl's lifeblood in her body and not care about her. Comte Lecter did save her from death.

Yet, a worse fate might be waiting for her. "Seeker Crawford thinks Abigail Hobbs might've helped her dad kill the other girls."

"How does that make you feel?"

Such a base question and so unnecessary. "How does it make **you** feel?" he spat.

"I find it vulgar."

"Me too."

"And entirely possible."

"It's not what happened," he responded, hackles raised. His skin itched under the padded leather covering his shoulders. Will lightly scratched it and retreated further.

"If the Seeker does not ask her himself, he will ask one of us too." It was a reasonable sentence and very true, but Will didn't want to hear it. It was a problem for him sometime later. Right now, Abigail was asleep and he wouldn't have to worry about the question of her innocence.

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Beverly walked through the barracks until she reached the courtyard. The air was filled with the clash of metal against metal as the guards practiced with dull blades. The clanging almost filled the air to the point where she couldn't hear it, but as she closed in on her prey, the familiar sound of bolts thumping against a target and the quick snap of the string being released entered her ear.

She was standing directly behind him when she asked, "You can use a crossbow?"

Will startled and the shot skewed right, streaking past the target. “Fenedhis lasa!” he cursed and ran after the bolt to retrieve it. She could see him grumbling under his breath, muttering, “Garas quenathra?” He didn’t seem to mean for her to actually hear it, but she responded anyway. “Ar ame ma ghilana’an.” He seemed surprised and glanced up at her.

“You speak elvhen?”

She shrugged and then waggled her eyebrows when he continued staring, “You don’t know anything about me. I’m very mysterious.” That caused him to grin. “I didn’t know that you could shoot a crossbow.”

“I’m very mysterious, too,” he shot back, but the barb was a comfortable sort. She knew as well as anyone else that nothing brings people together like having something in common, and who knows how long it had been since he had last heard elvhen spoken. She wouldn’t place any bets on being best friends anytime soon, but he felt safe enough to turn his back to her to retrieve the bolt and not look like he was going to run if she got close. She watched as he leaned down to pick it up; the view was definitely worth being the one to come get him for Jack. She hadn’t met any Dalish, but if they all looked like this, then she knew why so many people in the Alienage ran off to them. He made his way back none the wiser to her ogling. “You didn’t answer my question,” he said pointedly.

“I’ll answer it when you answer mine.”

He smiled, “Most Dalish can shoot a bow. We’re taught pretty young as a way to become stronger and to hunt or defend the clan. Unfortunately, I lost my bow quickly after I separated, and human-made bows don’t have the same strength.” He began to reload the crossbow. “I had to settle.”

“Even mages have to learn?”

“Wasn’t always considered a mage, but yes, even some mages. Now it’s your turn to answer.”

She shrugged. “I grew up in an Alienage. We don’t have as much of a grasp of the language as the Dalish do, but we speak some of it.”

“You grew up in an Alienage. I thought only elves lived there.”

“Elves and half-elves.”

This caused him to return to staring at her, trying to look through her. It was the same thing many people did when they realized that she was a half-elf; they tried to look for which features came from which parent. They often couldn’t tell anyway. Her eyes were a bit bigger than normal and her ears just the slightest bit tapered, but otherwise she was completely human.

“I didn’t know,” he said quietly.

“Not many people do.”

“Does Jack?” She smiled. It was cute to see how worried he was.

“He does. Jack isn’t the kind of person that judges that kind of thing, in case you haven’t noticed.” She could tell that he had.

“He appreciates you for the work you do and the ability that you have, regardless of origin.” She affirmed his presumption.

“So why were you practicing? Don’t you have magic?”

His body language shifted. Over the course of the conversation, Will had become open, facing towards her (even if he didn’t look in her eyes), smiling, and speaking freely. As soon as she asked about magic, he closed up again, windows shuttering.

“I don’t like resorting to magic. People aren’t very friendly, you know?”

“Sure,” she said, but didn’t believe it. People weren’t going to be friendly anyway, there had to be something else. The air became stale, so she tried to turn to lighter topics.

“Well, you stuck him pretty well, before you brought that spirit magic out. Brian pulled out the bolts and wanted to get them gilded or decorated for you. I thought you wouldn’t think it was funny.”

He shrugged and began notching the bolt into the crossbow again. “Probably not.”

“I thought we should decorate your staff with them, like ornaments.”

He chuckled and quickly released the bolt. It was only slightly off-center. “That would be... interesting.” Seeming to consider it, he started to grab another bolt, but paused. “Why are you really here?”

Time for work, time for play. “Jack sent me to find out what you know about gardening.”

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The forest was damp today, and the muddy earth gave way softly underfoot. In contrast, nothing about his traveling companions was soft. The Seekers, in their relatively heavy armor and general lack of consideration for the forest, were trampling everything underfoot. Crawford was barrelling through the underbrush, and Jimmy and Zeller were walking too heavily and talking too loudly. He was a little worried that they might disturb something. This place was called the Emerald Graves for a reason.

Probably worse than the noise was the pleased look that Seeker Crawford was giving him, bordering on smug. The light streaming from between the branches of the tall trees struck the Seeker’s face, giving his head a glow that just made the smirk more annoying. After a while, they had gotten closer to the area where guards were stationed on look out.

“It’s a good thing we can have you out here Will. I’m glad that the Comte assured us of his confidence and agreed to sponsor you. I was worried that we’d lose you.”

Well that made him feel better about the whole thing, didn’t it? “He agreed to continue the sponsorship, so long as he can meet with me regularly to *evaluate* my wellbeing.” There was

of course the underlying threat of what would happen if his being was found profoundly unwell. Will wouldn't do well in a Circle. The Comte probably hadn't meant it that way directly, but once Will left his presence, he could read between the lines.

Crawford seemed to shake off the dour mood that Will had placed in the air and gestured forward towards the guards. "The local watch found traps for small animals all throughout this area of the woods and there was a large number of natural herbs and plants that had been stationed to ward them off as well."

They moved forward, dividing the guards as Will looked before him. In a neat row, seven bodies were in the process of being unearthed. There were no charms or wards placed anywhere, and he couldn't feel the aftertaste of lightning on his tongue, so no primal magic (or at least recent primal magic) in the immediate area. The corpses were rotting and covered in fungi.

"I suppose he didn't want his crop disturbed."

"I'm not sure about that," said Zeller. He had come to learn in the past few days that Zeller was the group's alchemist and herbalist rolled into one, which became immediately relevant with the next words out of his mouth. "Not all of these or even most of these are edible, and there aren't any Deep Mushrooms, so there would be no point in growing them."

"He must have been growing them for something!" Jimmy added. "They were all very well-fertilized. Poisons?"

"Maybe," Jack added, and Will shook his head no. There was something about the feeling around the area that put the idea off for him.

"There are much easier ways of growing fungi for much deadlier poisons."

Beverly seemed to materialize by Will and he started, not having expected for her to be that silent. That made it twice today. Now that he thought about it, when they were all trampling through the woods, Beverly had actually been the exception; he had just been so focused on the other three. Seems like she was the rogue of the group to balance out the others. "I checked the dirt, it looks like some that local farmers use, he must have been encouraging growth and probably decay."

Brian smiled ruefully, "Odd way to dispose of a body. Cannibalism seems more logical compared to this." He glanced up to see four incredulous looks pointed in his direction. "What? He'd have to be extremely patient if he was willing to wait for mushrooms to grow."

"I still say he could have been cultivating poisons," Jimmy stated, to which Brian scoffed.

Will rolled his eyes.

Zeller and Beverly continued to observe the scene, before the former seemed to notice something. Quickly, he knelt to the ground and began pressing on the chest and opening the mouth of the corpse. Amongst the trampled and dug up dirt, there were small pipes that looked like they had been ripped out of a dried blood and mucus filled area. Once he pried

open the mouth, Zeller carefully extracted packed-in dirt. “They were alive when they were buried,” he whispered. “It looks like he was trying to keep them that way.

Will nodded, “Certain kinds of magic can preserve a person’s life force for a short period of time, but this doesn’t look like any form of Creation magic.”

Jimmy seemed to follow, “It doesn’t appear to be a form of necromancy either, that would mean that they were either completely dead, or we would be dealing with shambling corpses. Blood magic?”

“There have been rumors that blood magic can sustain a person unnaturally. Perhaps he used it to keep them barely alive until he didn’t need them anymore?” Will suggested, glancing warily at the look the comment brought from Brian.

“Just long enough for the fungus to eat away the flesh and make them unrecognizable,” was Jimmy’s conclusion accompanied by nary an odd look or judgmental statement. It seems that at least one person wasn’t about to take issue with him knowing a *single* detail about blood magic.

“That would explain the lack of restraints,” said Beverly. Seeker Crawford raised an eyebrow, so she elaborated. “If they were held by blood magic, then it would be impossible for them to leave. They were held in thrall.”

“And if they were to become cognizant, the magic would wear off and their bodies would die immediately because of the state they were in,” the leader surmised with a strange look on his face. He stared for a moment at the milling crowd and guards, before making a disgusted noise. “He’s clearly not lazy, but the bodies aren’t exactly well-preserved. If it wasn’t for food, for potions, or for aesthetics, would you say it was revenge.”

Brian protested briefly, but was cut off with Jack’s sharp, “We need to consider every angle.”

Beverly, who had been carefully examining the body next to Zeller’s for anything comparable or similar, shook her head. “This is very elaborate, but I feel like the scene would be messier. Like you said, he’s not lazy.”

“Hmmm…” Crawford paused before yelling out, “Clear the scene!” The guards and other Seekers jumped into action and began preparing to clean up the area. Will almost started to leave, but the Seeker put his hand on Will’s shoulder, and WIll knew that he would be expected to stay. He would finally be doing what he specialized in, but now he wasn’t anticipating it. Last time had been extremely difficult, so this time he came prepared. As everyone left, he balanced against the closest tree trunk and pulled out his tincture of herbs and carefully put the mixture in his mouth, more than usual. He chewed for a moment, savoring the leafy, but dried texture, before pulling out his waterskin to wash it down.

After a couple of minutes of meditation, heaviness overtook his limbs, so he closed his eyes and allowed himself to drift away.

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She looked at him from across the way. She had been following Jack Crawford for a while and this new apostate would make great news for the Empress's court. A Seeker of Truth, a member of the organization meant for oversight for the Templars and mages alike, had employed an apostate. Not just any apostate, but a Dalish one at that. She wanted to get a closer look, but several of the guards were holding the onlookers back.

Well, Freddie was used to getting what she wanted, and she wasn't going to let a little thing like this hold her back.

She walked up to one of the guards, clearly from the small town. He would have no idea who she was. It was sad really, but useful at the moment. She wore her best concerned face and asked the man, "Excuse me, but one of my children was with the group that discovered the body." The man nodded sympathetically; she wanted to get a closer look at him, but his face was obscured by the helmet. "Thank you for being so good with them."

A gravelly voice through the helmet replied, "They were brave."

"They are good boys," she said. "You're a member of the community, right?"

He nodded, clearly a point of pride for him with all of these out-of-towners, some from the big city and some from the woods, all running through and reading the scene. "Yes, madame."

"Could I ask you a few things? They're going to have questions and I want to be able to answer them."

"Of course." Perfect.

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He cast a spell he had recently learned was perfect for creating shallow graves. Carefully, oh so carefully, he placed the bodies. No one would disturb them. Nobody came this far out into the Graves. Once they were buried, he worked his blood magic. It required some time, and herbs would only get him so far, but it was worth it.

He didn't need them to know they were dying. That didn't matter.

He walked through his home, the beauty of what he had accomplished flowing through him. He watched the mushrooms grow, watched as they became beautiful.

This is my design.

He glanced down into the grave to see the beauty of life created, and was astonished to see Garrett Hobbs staring up at him.

The head lolled to the side to more carefully stare into his face. Quicker than the eye could see, a hand shot out and grasped his arm. Garrett Hobbs was no longer there, but an exhumed corpse was. It took him a moment, but he realized that it wasn't a corpse; they were breathing and living. He was so startled, he didn't think to ask himself how he had gone from slumping against the tree to kneeling in front of one of the bodies.

“Somebody help!” he yelled, and several of the guards rushed over to him. He pointed at the body, desperate to get up and move away from the scene. People surrounded the living person and they began to remove them and try to get them back in town.

After he managed to get away from the Seekers and the guards and everyone else that wanted his attention, he headed straight to the small manor in the richer part of Red Crossing. This time, without Jack as an escort, he had to wear a hood to cover his ears and to hide part of his clothing. Nesiraya let him in without comment and left to get the Comte.

He paced around the chancery portion of the library, hands brushing gently over the spines of the books lining the walls, not reading any of them. The door across the way gently opened the door and he jerked in that direction. Comte Lecter glided into the room, “Will?”

He reached into his bag and slapped the papers down onto the desk. “This may have been premature.”

“Are you denying my sponsorship?”

“I’m saying that I don’t know if you should give it to me.” He shifted his route in the other direction when he saw Comte Lecter heading in his way. “Tying your name to this might blow up in your face if something happens, and I’m not sure I’ll be staying with the Seekers to see what kind of mess it makes.”

“Jack sent a message saying that you had a bad reaction in the field.”

“It got here before me.”

“Just as you arrived actually. What did you see?”

He tucked himself into the wall, ashamed. “Hobbs.”

He couldn’t hear the Comte move, but he felt the presence appear behind him. Heat that penetrated to his skin, curling pins and needles beneath. He felt suffocated.

“I saw… a vision. I saw him lying there… in someone else’s grave.”

“Did you tell Jack?” If anything that only made him feel worse. “No.”

The presence moved away and the anxiety lifted from his veins. “It’s stress, nothing more.”

That didn’t feel like it made sense. “Nothing more?”

“You displaced the victim of another killer with what you feel may be your own.”

“Hobbs wasn’t my victim.”

“What was he then?”

“Dead.” It echoed around him and he felt breath on the back of his neck, a whispered “see” hissed out. Then it was gone.

“Is it hard to imagine what somebody else feels when killing, now that you have your own associations to replace it?” Will nodded, not trusting himself to speak. The words that came out might not be his own.

“Hmmm… Seeker Crawford said that they found evidence that the right hands of every person were exposed, thanks to the amount of dirt on them. Why leave them exposed? To feel their life draining away?”

The very thought seemed ridiculous and Will didn’t need a spirit nearby to tell him that. “No. The man left the bodies in a straight line; he’s practical. That’s far too abstract.” Will leaned back against the pillar, relaxing his body. As soon as he did it, Comte Lecter crossed the room and went around the desk, affecting a relaxed gait. Will didn’t move away.

“He was cultivating them?”

“He was keeping them alive,” Will clarified and moved to sit down. “Some sort of blood magic ritual to keep them alive, so long as he kept the ritual going.”

Suddenly he realized that he was sitting on the desk, but the Comte hadn’t reacted, so he felt no need to bring attention to it. Will would get up when it felt like he could without doing so.

“I’m led to believe that he didn’t, considering that all but one died.”

“They did; we weren’t able to get a healer to come over in time. Everyone keeps referring to them as the crops or thinking of the people as important, but that wasn’t his focus! They were the fertilizer; what he cared about was the fungus on their bodies.”

“Fungi often seem to behave in a rather life-like pattern. People have reported interacting with them at times and they do seem to behave in their own fashion.”

It was strange. Someone didn’t question his thoughts or his assertions; this man, this noble, allowed him to speak and even worked off what he was saying. People rarely did that, or, at least, they didn’t without giving him strange looks and treating him like a mage on the edge of possession.

“Interact? Is it possible that he is seeking something to interact with?”

“A connection?” responded his Lordship. “Fungi do seem to often have a hive mind; they are connected even across plains and swamps.”

“People can’t connect that way.”

“You can,” replied the Comte, which just showed how much he didn’t know about Will’s gift. It also showed how much he did, which meant Will would need to keep an eye on him.

“Not physically and not with reciprocity,” he replied, eyeing the man suspiciously. Bad enough that he was already a mage, but if anyone knew how his gift worked, they would lock him up for sure. They would use him or make him Tranquil, and he didn’t want that.

“It would still be worth looking into.” With that, Will bid his farewell to the Comte, taking great care to remain polite and in his good graces. This would be a problem for tomorrow.

It didn’t occur to him that by the end of the conversation, not once had Comte Lecter acknowledged his comment about wanting to leave the Seekers, and that, by the end of the conversation, Will had forgotten his own concerns as well. He had been too caught up in the links that were being snapped together about the murderer and the spirit attached to his scenes to realize.

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She had waited patiently for this moment. It had taken far too long for Lady du Launcet to arrange this meeting with his Lordship, allowing her to enter Comte Lecter’s domain as an up-and-coming noble from the Free Marches. It couldn’t have come at a more opportune time too, seeing as the man had access to what would be the hottest gossip of the moment (if Freddie had her say): the Dalish elf that just started working with the Seekers. Freddie had even meticulously made sure to put in documents of her existence as Lady Kimball, member of the merchant class in Markham. Hopefully he would take to her with some amusement, if nothing else.

The door to the library was opened by an elven servant that eyed her with some… emotion. Freddie wasn’t able to tell which. She breezed past her, but made a note. Any bard worth their salt never forgot the servants. They were wonderful information gatherers and great allies or terrible enemies. She had once mistaken an elf servant of the Empress Celene I for a simple-minded nobody; that assumption had quickly been remedied when she learned (the hard way) that Briala was actually the head of Celene’s spy network.

“Ah, Lady Kimball. Good evening to you,” came a voice rounding one of the shelves.

“Good evening to you as well,” she replied as the Comte came around the corner. He was handsome, in a very unconventional sense. Regardless of his origin, he was bound to be suspicious of a noble in his home. She needed to appear as unremarkable and harmless as possible.

“Thank you so much for inviting me here! I am a bit new to Orlais and haven't had the chance to really socialize with anyone. I was hoping to make some new friends.” High pitched voice, quick speaking habits; if she made it a bit airy, but not too much it would give her the appearance of naive youth. She had to carefully prune her accent, imitating foreign young nobles that came to Orlais and attempted the same affectation.

“Of course,” he replied. “It’s always important to have friends when you are in a new place, especially in a place such as Orlais.”

He stepped towards a chair and motioned for her to sit down as well. “I’ve heard so much about you! I can imagine you being a great friend,” she stated, pitching her voice even higher, but careful to keep it from being shrill. If she seemed too eager it could be her undoing.

His face was impassive. It was slightly disconcerting. “May I ask why you have felt the need to introduce yourself now?” Not a question she wanted to be answering.

“May I ask you a few questions first?” The game was afoot.

“Of course.”

“You have been at court for quite a while. What brings a noble from Nevarra to Orlais?”

“Are you Freddie Lounds?” Fuck. The man advances slightly and a subtle change in posture made his back longer and his stature looming. She sighed, trying to maintain an air of control. “I am so embarrassed.”

“You should be. A bard such as yourself, especially one as infamous as the Red Tattler, ought to be a little more subtle,” he motioned over to the lounge near the wall. He sat and had her sit. The moment seemed to go on and on, the two of them sitting there. They were staring at each other. She felt like looking away would be tantamount to exposing her throat. “You were very insistent about meeting me on such short notice.”

She swallowed. “This is just when I had time to meet you.”

“How did you know when Will would be here?” he shot back.

“I may have listened in on the two of you,” she replied, knowing that she was on thin ice, not actually answering his question.

He looked both hungry and impassive, if it was possible. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Bile rose up in the back of her throat. “I can’t.”

He smirked slightly. The tiniest movement of the left side of his lip rising on his face, dimpling into his cheek. “You’ve been terribly rude Madame Lounds. What’s to be done about that?”

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The day had been extremely eventful, between the visits from Will and the Red Tattler and then the mysterious farmer. Of course, to finish off the day Seeker Crawford asked if he could visit him, presumably to discuss Will. Naturally, Hannibal invited him over for dinner.

His place setting was at the end of the long table and his guest sat at his right side. Hannibal brought in the dish that he had made for this meal in particular. “Loin served with a Cumberland sauce of red fruits. This one is made with strawberries, raspberries and currants.”

Seeker Crawford was polite enough not to tuck into the food just yet. “Cumberland sauce? So this is a dish native to your home country.”

“The sauce is at least,” he replied.

“What kind of loin is it?”

“Pork,” he replied.

“This truly is beautiful food, your Lordship. I’ll admit, I was surprised to hear that you were the one who made it.”

“Truly?”

Hannibal smiled and began to eat, which signaled for the Seeker to eat as well. “I know many nobles prefer not to, but I was idle in my youth and drove myself to different passions. One of them was cooking.”

Crawford made an appreciative noise as he ate his pork. It always thrilled Hannibal to see someone enjoying the forbidden, especially without their knowledge.

“It’s rare that I get a meal like this,” the Seeker said. “More often than not I live off of rations and tavern food, being so far away from home. My wife is an ambassador for the Empress so she is always away.” Far from home? Hannibal made a quick note to have someone send Jack Crawford an invitation to stay at one of his guest homes on the estate. It was a risk, but a thrilling one. It would also endear him to the man and would allow him to keep an eye on his most dangerous connection. He continued between bites. “I also seemed to have married my mother, as much as I tried to avoid it.”

“Your mother didn’t cook?”

The broad man let out a hearty laugh that echoed through the empty dining hall. It felt odd to be in it with another person. More specifically another singular person. He was usually by himself or with a crowd of adoring nobles, eager for his attention and advice. The room had been meticulously decorated for the season. The pale greenish-gray walls complemented the deep brown table and dark curtains in front of the segmented windows on the west side of the room. The wall opposite them was the same white and black-veined marble that was on the floor and had faint purposeful cracks in it where vines were growing through and stretching to the ceiling. Shelves extended from it that he grew his herbs in. Other decorations usually lined the wall, depending on the season and setting of the menu, but he chose to keep them out this time. Impressing Jack Crawford would not come through displays of wealth, but rather sincerity.

“My mother cooked,” Jack finally said, bringing Hannibal back to his guest. “I just wished she didn’t. She had a dish that she called Marcher Pie. It was a whole fish underbaked and under-spiced with a few dried fruits on top. I ate the fruit and dumped the pie outside.” He chuckled at the joke. “I was very scrawny as a child.”

Hannibal extended his wine glass to his guest. “Well hopefully next time she is in, you can bring your wife with you. I’d love to have you both for dinner.”

They gently clinked their glasses together in a toast, before returning back to the meal before them. It was quiet for a few moments while they ate, before the serenity was interrupted by the Seeker.

“I’m curious why Will went back to see you after you already agreed to sponsor him. He was extremely unhappy with the mere existence of the arrangement.”

Hannibal shrugged, attempting to make it visible to his guest, but not going so far as to make it gauche. “I lost the stick and kept the carrot. It’s much easier to remind him of the benefits of the agreement between us than the repercussions should he choose not to participate.”

Jack tossed his head back and forth. “It’s hardly a stick, your Lordship. The simple fact was that someone was going to find him sooner or later. Better it be someone who won’t force him in the Circle and can make sure that he is doing some good. He was already helping people anyway.”

“It is still blackmail, Seeker Crawford.”

“Please, call me Jack,” Crawford insisted. He tasted the wine finally and hummed. Hannibal knew he had a similar opinion, but opted to keep it to himself. “This wine is delicious.”

“Priorat from Rialto Bay.”

Jack took another appreciative sip. “You didn’t answer my question, your Lordship.” How blunt.

“I am sure that Will recognizes the necessity of the situation and my support. If he is going to continue to work in the field, he is going to need more than someone to sponsor him. He will need someone to listen to him.”

The Seeker looked indignant. “I listen to him”

“Someone to listen that is not immediately connected to the situation then,” Hannibal elaborated.

The wine glass was set down and Jack leaned forward slightly, not enough to upset the balance of the table, but enough to get the point across. “I am sure that a young mage like Will is very aware of what goes on in his own head, and that’s why he doesn’t wish to have anyone knowing.”

The man was more astute than Hannibal had given him credit for. Perhaps that was not for the best though. “Are you not accustomed to broken ponies in your stable?”

“Do you believe that Will is a broken pony?” Jack asked, the ball thrown back in his court. Jack had been slightly thrown off by the question, but switched to the new train of conversation with ease. Hannibal just needed to continue to direct the conversation on the path of his choosing, laying one brick at a time for Jack to follow.

“I believe that *you* believe he is a broken pony. Have you ever lost one Jack?” The man in question pushed the plate away and leaned back in the dining chair. “I have lost someone in the field before, yes. Why do you ask?”

“You seem to be so delicate with him. Do you not trust him or are you afraid of losing another pony?”

He shook his head and returned to eating. “I’m not the one you’re supporting and I’d prefer not to have this conversation.” It was always satisfying when he managed to successfully

plant a seed. Now, he just had to wait to see how it would grow and ripen, cultivating his own fruit. His own garden of circumstances to pluck and eat later when the time was right.

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The night had been a rough one, but the next day Will felt refreshed. Well, as refreshed as he could be after several nightmares and pushing away demons. But! He was awake, not possessed, and with a mind more ready to help the Seekers.

He arrived at the barracks much later than he would have wanted, but nobody bothered to chastise him for it. Everyone was too busy trying to analyze what might have caused the incident discovered yesterday.

“I’ve never really seen blood magic in use before,” commented Beverly as he walked by. “Have you seen it?”

Will shook his head. “I haven’t. The people that I grew up with and those I learned from disallowed blood magic just as vehemently as the Chantry did.”

“Do all Dalish or just the Clan you grew up with?”

“As far as I know, most Dalish Clans reject blood magic,” he said and shrugged.

Beverly smiled, “Not a Dalish then.” She then moved away and towards Brian. Will paused for a moment; he hadn’t realized that had been a possibility. He supposed it could seem like something a human would suspect a Dalish would do, having known nothing about the culture. A bunch of dead humans returned to nature deep in the Emerald Graves. A revenge killing wouldn’t be out of the question. No wonder the guards had been behaving oddly around him yesterday.

Shrugging, Will joined Beverly by Brian; not his fault that some humans didn’t do their research. At least now someone could explain to him that he wasn’t protecting a long lost member of his Clan (or killing those humans himself). The alchemist glanced up at Will as he joined them, “Beverly told me what’s up.” Then, Brian began picking at the mushrooms. A quick sniff and taste test of a non-poisonous one left him spitting out dirt. “It’s like someone bathed him in sugar!”

Jimmy piped up from across the room, face buried in tomes and samples of blood from the scene, “Don’t mushrooms love that stuff?”

Brian nodded, still trying to clean off his tongue with his teeth, “It’s probably what he had been soaking them in to grow them.”

“He was using that pipe system was he not?” Will asked.

The alchemist nodded vigorously before running over and grabbing several phials of transparent red liquid from Jimmy, despite the former-Templar’s protests. “This is what we found with them. It’s a sugar solution infused with blood that the blood mage had going through all of them.”

“He must have been giving them some sort of potion that helped the mushrooms grow, in addition to the blood magic that was keeping them alive,” Jimmy added.

Will joined the two of them in the thought. “He kept them going long enough to grow the mushrooms and then neglected maintaining the magic once he got the result that he wished. They probably died because the magic keeping them alive was gone.” Jimmy nodded.

“Here’s the question,” interjected Beverly. “Who is he preying on? There’s always a pattern to these and this will be no different.”

Silence filled the room as they tried to decide what to say next. The other three separated and Will stood awkwardly for a moment. Beverly looked sadly at him, “We’re focusing a lot on the why and looking at the result, but let’s see if we can figure out who he’s been grabbing and work from there.” Slightly ashamed that he had been absorbed in the killer and less on the victims, Will decided to join Jimmy near one of the bodies. The man was looking carefully at the arm of the one in question. When Will approached, Jimmy moved aside and motioned to the limb. “Does this look wrong to you?”

Will took a slightly closer look. The limb was jagged and destroyed thanks to mushrooms that had to be plucked from it, but it also hung wrong. The bone peeking out at them looked thin and bowed, as if a small bit of weight would snap it in half. “She was ill,” Will said.

“Chronically so,” affirmed Jimmy.

They both looked around the rear of the room. “What about the rest?” The four of them began rapidly examining the rest of the bodies, careful to not come in direct contact with blood or bile. On all of them, they found signs of disease or injury, always something life affecting and permanent.

“So,” Will concluded. “He’s preying on the ill and infirm.”

They group dashed to the inn, Seeker Jack Crawford leading the call both armed and extremely dangerous. He pulled everyone up short in front of the building. “Another person that disappeared that fit the type our killer is going after. Everywhere this mage has gone, people have been disappearing. He wasn’t the only mage doing thus,” here Jack looked to Will, “which made him harder to track or gauge. Last time I checked, he should be staying here. This is where we put him after all.”

The group burst in, ready to go. Crawford approached the innkeeper with absolute purpose. “Everyone! Stop what you’re doing and put your hands in the air!” The group trailed behind him, all of the people staying there watched the Seekers and Will move through the common area.

The innkeeper, a red-faced young man with one prominent gold hoop earring, greeted them, “Seeker Crawford! What brings you to the inn? It doesn’t appear that your friend has done anything?” Behind Jack, Will scowled.

“You recall Eldon Stammets?”

“The mage helping with the unfortunate in the Chantry’s clinic? I am aware.”

If anything, this made Crawford look even more frustrated. “One of the people in the village went missing last night and the last place she was seen was here, getting his help.”

The man’s eyes went wide and he absently tugged on the earring, “He what?”

The Seeker nodded gravely, “We have reason to believe that he was also responsible for the people found out in the Graves recently.”

The innkeeper’s face went from red to an alarming shade of burgundy. He appeared to stop breathing. Crawford waited for but a moment before sighing. It was followed by a mighty yell, “Is he STILL HERE?”

This shook the man out of his stupor. “N-no. He left just a few moments ago. He said he needed to take care of something.”

“Can you show me to his room then?” the Seeker demanded.

“Oh! Of course!” replied the innkeeper and he scurried from around the bar and up the stairs. They moved past the common area all the way up to the actual rooms. Will was surprised to see that the man was staying only two doors down from him. “Here!” the innkeeper pointed out. Jimmy checked the door, “It’s locked.”

Crawford moved Jimmy out of the way and kicked the door open. They fanned out through the room and began rummaging through his belongings. “Why did he not have a Templar with him?” demanded Jack.

The innkeeper shook. “They didn’t want to stay since there were Seekers in the village and told him to report to you from now on.”

The rest of the crew glanced around at each other. Clearly no such message had been passed on to Jack and he certainly hadn’t seen the mage. “And no one bothered to actually reach out to me?” Jack yelled behind them as Will, Beverly, Jimmy, and Brian immediately abandoned the innkeeper to search the room.

While messing around the bed, Will accidentally kicked a large trunk underneath it. The sound was dull and the truth felt heavier than it should have. “Seeker Crawford!” The man in question hustled over, not bothering to correct Will for interrupting his dressing down of the innkeeper, and began dragging out the trunk when it was indicated. As it hit the ground, a muffled noise that sounded like flesh hitting the wood was heard. “Move!” shouted Beverly and she rushed forward, a set of lockpicks in her hand.

There were a few brief moments where the tension pulled everyone’s spines before an audible click sounded throughout the room. Jack pulled open the trunk and inside was a young woman surrounded by dirt. She had several tubes sticking out of her. Brian began checking her over and Jimmy ran to get the guards. Beverly moved elsewhere in the room and began looking through Stammets’ belongings, presumably to find out where he was going.

Jack looked up at Will and seemed to notice the faint trembling. “Will! We’ll find him. We know who he is and what he looks like. He’ll have to find another place to go.”

This didn’t stop his shaking. The man lived next to him. He had been taking care of Abigail. He had saved Abigail. “We’ll get him,” said Jack as he gently set a hand on Will’s shoulder.

“Jack. Come here.” The two of them moved around to face Beverly. She was holding a piece of pressed parchment. On the front of it was a rough picture of him, clearly done with ink and a woodblock. It was sloppy and didn’t necessarily look like him, that sort of thing is hard to do with a uniform press, but it was similar enough that a person expecting him might recognize him.

“What does it say?” asked Jack.

Beverly glanced up at Will, but the Seeker’s tone left no room for argument. “The Seekers of Truth, meant to be the oversight of abuse and corruption in the Circle of Magi and the Templar Order, are not only recruiting mages, but apostates. Even more scandalous is the fact that the one in question is not a believer in the Maker, but a Dalish elf.” She stopped and her eyes skimmed the rest of the article.

“Jack,” she whispered. She sounded upset. “She goes into a lot of detail.” He grabbed the paper from her and read it himself, shoulders tensing and brow tightening.

“Son of a bitch.”

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Freddie was resting comfortably in her room at The Dancing Fox, but that respite was quickly interrupted. A few moments of silence and the door burst open. Three very armed individuals rushed in, a Seeker and two of the local guards and they threw her down against the hard mattress. The fibers rubbed roughly against her face. Her hands were tied behind her back with scratchy rope, and she was yanked around into the sitting position.

“It’s clear,” yelled the Seeker, a person she was familiar with. Poor man probably wasn’t expecting her to use what he gave her. His name… maybe it was Benjamin?

Then strode in the man of the hour, Jack Crawford, wearing black and gray dragonbone plate armor with the insignia of the Seekers of Truth emblazoned on the breast plate.

“While I appreciate the theatrics, Seeker Crawford, you cannot arrest me for spreading the truth about your actions.” It had taken her forever to get that bit of news done. Other bards prefer to quietly move through the Grand Game, but Freddie liked to announce her presence. She made a reputation by aligning herself with a local printer and publishing small manuscripts for daily gossip in the court. *The Weekly Tattler* had to keep up with the ever-changing scandals of the Grand Game, which left her impoverished (compared to other bards), but kept her editor happy. They were a little behind currently, with her traipsing the plains instead of staying in Val Royeaux, but the content was more than worth it. It was the second most popular bit of reading consumed by the nobles, right after the *Randy Dowager Quarterly* , and this would only put it higher on everyone’s list.

“You entered an area sensitive to a recent crime without permission!” yelled Crawford.

She scoffed, amused at the gall of him. “Escorted by a guard. Under false pretenses it may have been, but in Orlais that’s as good as permission.”

“You lied!” he roared back.

“And you can’t arrest me for that either!”

The shouting died down as the Seeker paced in front of her. The silence left many of the people around nervous; they shifted and murmured.

“You got all of that information from a local guard?” Benjamin shifted next to her slightly. He was lucky that Crawford focused completely on her or his ass would be grass. A crass saying, but it felt apt.

“Lots of people are talking about your little elf,” she bullshitted. No one was talking about him yet, but once more copies of her pamphlet went out, there would be. She could see the chaos now. “Lots of rivalry around who gets his collar. A local guard with some issues about the Chantry’s best interfering on local business might have some insight. I’m sure if it was a Templar, I would have gotten more.” Unfortunately for her, not many Templars want to talk with her, especially about the Seekers of Truth. She supposed it came with the territory of having an organization with no oversight have oversight over you and the fear that accompanied that.

“Evidently he did,” flatly stated the Seeker. He was looking at her, wanting her to reveal the lie. Freddie had enough control not to glance over at her informant who was shaking slightly.

“Of course! And what about the local Chantry’s lyrium addicts? I’m sure the Templars are thrilled with a mage being over them for once.”

“That’s not how it works. He’s working with the Seekers, not for them.”

Laughable. How a man as smart as Seeker Crawford could not see how he was blatantly being used by an elven apostate was beyond her. “That’s not how they see it, I’m sure.”

“And that’s not the point of this visit! Your little pamphlet let a murderer get away!”

Outrageous! “You’re blaming me!”

“I am!” responded Crawford. “And it isn’t the first time you’ve caused problems for us. If you keep this up, I’ll make sure the Grand Game has itself another loser.”

That was a problem. If she had anything, it was her position in the Game. A loss could mean death or worse, if she wasn’t careful. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t.” She hoped he wouldn’t.

“Don’t write another word about Will , and I won’t have to.”

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Will was resting peacefully on the cot near the bed that Abigail was laid upon. After everything at the inn this morning, he needed a place to rest. Unfortunately, that place was no longer the inn, as the whole debacle left the place feeling like slurry washing down on him. Besides, without anyone else to watch her, there was a chance that she could die. He had enough experience at this point that he could keep her alive with his barely passable Creation Magic, however, she would need to wake up soon.

Elgara vallas, da'len

Will started at the voice. It came from outside of the room that he was waiting in.

Melava somniar

The voice sounded almost musical, barely a wisp of noise. It settled on his senses like mist: A long forgotten lullaby.

Mala taren aravas

A push and pull for his senses. It almost hurt. A voice that wasn't the song began to speak as well, just underneath the verses. He stood and began to make his way out of the room

Ara ma'desen melar

"There was a young noble in fair Arlathan, and it happened that the elven king lost one of his two daughters to a serpent's bite."

Iras ma ghilas, da'len

In the hallway was a great Halla made of raven feathers. Its cold, dark eyes looked upon him with something undefinable. He followed the creature through the empty halls, sound echoing around like it couldn't stop moving. It filled him with such terror and love. It was a strange mix between the two. He followed it down the hall and the voices intertwined.

Ara ma ne'dan ashir

"At the ceremony to commemorate her life, the young noble saw an elven lady so fair and perfect that his heart broke-"

Dirthara lothlenan'as

"But by the laws of ancient Arlathan, he was forbidden to speak with her during the ceremony, and he did not learn who she was, so he could not ask her family to court her."

Bal emma mala dir

"The young noble prayed to the gods that he might meet the elven lady again."

Tel'enfenim, da'len

“He prayed to Mythal for love, and Dirthamen for the secret of the elven lady’s name, and to Andruil for luck in the hunt for this woman.”

Irassal ma ghilas

“And finally he made an offering to Fen’Harel.”

Ma garas mir renan

“And the Dread Wolf was the only one who answered.”

Ara ma’athlan vhenas

“In a dream, that night, he told the noble what he needed to do to see his heart’s love again.”

Ara ma’athlan vhenas

“Do you know what he said?”

“Kill the king’s other daughter.”

Will woke and realized that one of the voices he heard in his dream was Sister Alana’s. She had been reading from a book and his startling called her attention to him. He was still on the cot that had been his bed. The whole thing had been a dream.

“What are you reading?” he asked her, untucking the blanket from around him.

“A book of Dalish tales. Since you were the one watching her, I guess I wanted...” she paused and gave a great sigh. He noticed that she seemed like she hadn’t been sleeping either. There were bags under her blue eyes. “I guess I’m not sure what I wanted.”

“You could be reading to a killer,” he prompted, wanting to gauge her reaction to the statement. She shrugged. “I have no reason to feel either way.” Alana seemed tense.

“Do I make you nervous?” He had to ask. He made a lot of people nervous, but Will had hoped that Alana wasn’t one of them. She laughed, which made him feel a little better.

“No, I’m making me nervous. I’m about to broach the subject of the ‘Demon Speaker’ pamphlet.”

Oh. He must have responded aloud, because if anything she looked more tired with his spoken thoughts. “Did Jack send you?” She shook her head.

“I sent me.”

Will really didn’t want to talk about this. This was the absolute last thing he would like on his mind. Another thought flashed through his skull that quickly became of more interest. “I don’t think we’ve ever been in a room alone together. Have we?”

She made a good show of confusion, if nothing else. “Have we? I haven’t noticed.” Alana quickly motioned towards Abigail lying in the bed. “Not that we’re necessarily alone now. Stop trying to change the subject.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever read anything where I’ve been less happy to see discussion of the subjugation of elves.”

“It’s only because she was insincere,” Alana stipulated.

He huffed. It was probably childish, but at the moment he didn’t care. “Lounds made it sound like I was a poor waif that needed the help of the Chantry because I was constantly at the mercy of humans and demons. That or I wasn’t able to make decisions because I was one moment away from possession.”

She sighed. “We don’t have to talk about it, if you don’t want to.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied and realized he meant it. “Honestly, I was enjoying listening to you read. It’s been so long since I’ve heard stories from my people.”

Alana smiled, but closed the book. “She’s a success for you.”

A thin, drawn child with a stark red scar slashing her neck was lying on the bed. “She doesn’t look like a success.”

This seemed to draw Alana’s ire. “Don’t feel sorry for yourself because you saved this girl’s life.”

“I don’t. I don’t feel sorry for myself at all.” It was surprising to realize that he may mean that as well, at least a little. There were things he felt sorry about, but saving Abigail Hobbs wasn’t one of them. “I feel good.”

Alana seemed to doubt it, but she went back to reading. He laid back and listened to the rhythm of her voice, allowing it to lull him back asleep.

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It happened while she was leaving her room. Admittedly she was lucky that the proprietor of the Dancing Fox didn’t kick her out; apparently she hadn’t had fond thoughts of the Templars (she didn’t know of the existence of the Seekers) and appreciated someone calling them out. It had been a fairly lazy day so far and she was deciding where to eat next. As she turned to a more deserted alley to cut through to the other side of the buildings, she was stopped. It was the guard from the crime scene where she first saw the subject of her previous pamphlet. She wasn’t surprised. It had been that kind of week.

“I don’t know where you got half of that information, but it wasn’t from me!” he growled at her. He was in civilian clothing. Guess they took it out on him.

“I may have made some inferences.”

This only upset him more. “They think I told you all of it.” Poor man and his pathetic ego. This whole situation must really be doing a number on him.

“They saw you talking to me.” They did. She might have to be less obvious next time. Or is it more obvious? Sometimes she forgets the rules; she knows that she plays them well and that’s what matters. Usually plays them well.

“You lied to me!”

“I’m sorry it got you fired.” She wasn’t, but people liked to hear it.

“I wasn’t fired; I’m only on temporary leave.”

“You poor naive soul,” Freddie said as she moved towards him. “They’re going to fire you. Seeker Jack Crawford will make sure of it.”

He scoffed.

“I can help you get work. I know plenty of mercenary groups that would be happy to have another member.”

“I’m not the first guard you’ve gotten dismissed.” He was on the verge of laughing or crying, but still holding himself back from either.

“It pays better, I promise. Future you is thanking me.”

And then she saw blood.

It took her a moment to realize what it was, but she began scrubbing it out of her eyes at it stung them. When they were clear, she looked down to find the body of the guard… with no head. The flesh where the neck would be was shredded.

Looking up, she saw a blonde older man with a staff looking right at her. He stepped in front of her and pointed the staff at her vaguely, as if it wasn’t the weapon of mage to channel their magic, but just a random stick.

As if he hadn’t just used his abilities to kill the guard in front of her.

“I read your pamphlet,” he said as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

Later, when she finally managed to let the guards and Seekers know what had happened, she could scarcely speak. The whole encounter hadn’t felt real while it was happening and it still didn’t. How close had she come to dying? Her pamphlets were always very personal, a point of pride more than anything else. While it was nice to know that she had an audience beyond the amused condescension of the Orlesian court, she hadn’t wanted to find out like this.

“Madame Lounds?” Freddie looked up to see Seeker Crawford approaching her, a look on his face that could have been concern or annoyance. There was only one thing she could think to say: “He read my pamphlet.”

He towered over her. “The mage, Stammets, killed a guard. What stopped him from killing you?”

Someone had given her a blanket. She clutched further around herself. “It was a well-written article.” The Seeker looked like he was waiting for her to finish her thought. “He wants me to write another one.”

He was unreadable. “He wants you to write a manifesto?” No.

A more pressing question left her tongue, “Where’s Will ?” A few people milling around her stopped and then resumed what they were doing. What? She didn’t detest the man; Freddie just did her job. If that meant he got burned a little, it wasn’t personal. It was strange how a few words could sharpen people.

Seeker Crawford seemed to respond the sharpest. “We don’t need him here; we already have you as a witness to the murder.”

“Not why I’m asking,” she tried to clarify. He instantly understood and jumped into action. “Someone find me Will!” he shouted at the surrounding guards; they quickly started into action and scrambled to find a way to locate the elf. Crawford rounded on her, “This was about Will?”

She nodded. Freddie could tell that he wanted more, but it was hard to make herself speak around the stickiness on her tongue. Written word was so much easier. The words meant more and less at the same time. The weight of it didn’t belong to her. “He was… talking about people being like fungus, stretching out. Thoughts leaping from mind to mind alike. I thought he meant spirits. He saw what my article said, about how your pet mage could reach past the Veil.”

“What does he want with him?” came the demand.

“Someone that understands him. If Will can reach through the Veil then he can reach others. He was right; the blood mage wants a connection.”

Crawford’s shadow blocked out the clouds. “What did you tell him?” He was resisting grabbing her arm and shaking her, she knew. She also knew that he knew such conduct would simply give her more ammo to fire at his team. “Freddie, what did you tell him about Will?” That almost sounded like concern. “I need to know exactly what you said.”

“I told him about the Hobbs girl,” she whispered. “I told him everything he needed to know.” Freddie looked up to see the dawning horror on Crawford’s face. It was unnecessary, but she needed to say it aloud. Maybe then it wouldn’t be true.

“He’s going to bury her.”

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It hadn’t taken long for someone to find Will. He had been walking back to the inn for a fresh change of clothes and a bath, anything to feel a little like a person again. Then a guard

frantically rushed up to him. “Stammets…..” he gasped out. “Girl. Freddie. Chantry. Bury,” came in between breaths. It was enough for him to understand the predicament. Will dashed back to the Chantry with all of his might.

Bursting through the doors he ran over to where she had been staying. The room was empty.

A young Sister was nearby and he yelled, “Abigail Hobbs! Where is she?”

The young woman looked mildly confused. “Something about a bath and an herbal infusion? I’m not sure.”

“Who took her?” Will shouted. When no reply came, he got in her face, “Who took her?” No response came, but that only gave him exactly what he needed to know. He ran.

Back out of the Chantry and around it, he ran as fast as he could towards the forest. It took far too long for his liking. With every step that held no sight of them, Will was more and more sure that it was too late. It was only once he nearly gave up all hope that he saw them. A man digging a grave with a small twisted lump covered up beside him.

How dare he? A pit of heat formed in his stomach. Stammets was going to kill her. He had tried so hard to save her and this man would take that from him. ‘ *How dare he?’* was the whisper that came to him. It sounded everything and nothing like Hobbs.

His arm went forth and conjured the spell before he could stop it. It slammed into Stammets and held him. It forced him down and kept him down.

He wouldn’t be moving now.

“What were you going to do with her?” demanded Will.

“We were all once connected together. I am only reintroducing her to the concept.”

“By killing her?” he asked the pathetic waste. “By burying her alive?”

Stammets sniveled. “The bard… She said you understood me!”

“I don’t,” hurting him made Will feel better, even if it felt like a lie.

“You would have,” said Stammets. “When you walk through a field of mushrooms, they know you are there! It’s like we’re all in the Fade again; we’re all connected together and it doesn’t take much to reach out.” Small twitches in his face and arms suggested Stammets was struggling against his force field, but Will did not falter. “I know who you’re reaching for. It’s Abigail Hobbs. If I could bury her,” he stopped. “If I could bury her, she could finally reach back.”

A rustling came from behind him as the guard that had lost him earlier approached with the Seekers. Will could only stare as Eldon Stammets was drained by Jimmy and Brian and taken away, once he released his spell. Behind him, Jack Crawford clapped him gently on the shoulder and several people began gently picking up Abigail to take her back to the Chantry.

Will could only stare at the spot where Eldon Stammets once laid and wonder.

The room was excruciatingly quiet after. Jack had practically demanded that he go and visit with Comte Lecter after what he did to the other mage. This time he sat on one of the plusher library chairs and stared at the wall.

“When you cast at Eldon Stammets… who did you see?”

“I didn’t see Hobbs,” he said quickly. Will almost wished that he had. It would have made it easier.

“Then you’re not being haunted by Hobbs’ spirit. What might be bothering you is that one day there will be a man so evil that you will take pleasure in killing him.”

He moved his eyes just enough to see the barest shape of his Lordship in the peripheral. “Killing Hobbs felt just. It felt right.”

“And that’s why you’re here,” Comte Lecter so helpfully pointed out. “You want to prove that your pleasure came from saving Abigail, not killing her father.”

If only it was that simple. He could still feel the tingle of magic at his fingertips, brushing against his palms, caressing his wrists.

“I didn’t enjoy what happened with Stammets.” He didn’t.

“You didn’t kill him.” He didn’t.

Will supposed that honesty couldn’t hurt. “I’m not entirely sure that I didn’t mean to before I cast the spell.”

Hannibal stood up and walked over and behind him, making Will lose sight of him. He may not have been able to see him, but he could feel the Comte’s presence behind him, his skin crawling and tingling at his neck and upper back. The noble didn’t touch him.

“Then you understood him.” The presence moved away and Will turned to watch the man head towards his desk. “It’s beautiful in its own way… giving voice to the unmentionable.”

“I should have stayed out of it. I should have left as soon as I got the chance. That or stay hidden in the forest, away from humans in general.”

“A simple life for simplicity’s sake. Predictable and easy, at least for a nature-walker such as yourself. All you have to do is fall back on your instinctual paddle. Where was that when you killed Hobbs?”

Will started and had to squash down any anger that began to rise up. So close to merging himself with the spirits, that kind of emotion could be immensely dangerous. “That’s supposed to be you.”

Comte Lecter stared at him for a moment before answering. “Did it bother you that much? Do you really feel so bad because killing him felt so good?”

That hit the root of the problem. Will could feel bumps raising along his skin and his throat closing. Air expelled before he was ready, pushing itself out in a whisper, “I liked killing Hobbs.”

His Lordship was looking away, so Will could only guess at what horrible conclusion he drew from what Will said. He was ready to be thrown out, turned over to the Templars, hunted down like a rabid dog.

“Killing must feel good to the Maker, too. He does it all of the time. Didn’t he create us, mold us? Weren’t we made for our creativity and ingenuity?”

Will scoffed. “Not all of us.”

Comte Lecter bowed his head deferentially. “My apologies. I simply find that so many of the Chantry followers neglect to realize that the Maker is terrific. I recently received news that he dropped a Chantry roof on his worshippers in Velun. They had been singing through the Canticle of Exaltations.”

“Did your Maker feel good about that?”

The Comte looked him right in the eyes. “He felt powerful.”

Chapter End Notes

Elvhen Translations:

Fenedhis lasa!: Common curse, definition unknown

Garas quenathra?: Why are you here?/Why have you come?

Ar ame ma ghilana'an: I am to guide you (to a place). Rough translation, please correct it if you have a better grasp of elven.

Elgara vallas, da’len/Melava somniar/Mala taren aravas/Ara ma’desen melar/Iras ma ghilas, da’len/Ara ma ne’dan ashir/Dirthara lothlenan’as/Bal emma mala dir/Tel’enfenim, da’len/Irassal ma ghilas/Ma garas mir renan/Ara ma’athlan vhenas: Lyrics to lullaby Mir Da'len Somniar (translation) Sun sets, little one/Time to dream/Your mind journeys/But I will hold you here/Where will you go, little one/Lost to me in sleep?/Seek truth in a forgotten land/Deep within your heart/Never fear, little one/Wherever you shall go/Follow my voice/I will call you home https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zl3CmzQY1So (This is the version in my head)

Mana. Ma halani.

Chapter Summary

Abigail wakes up and more than one character returns to the scene of a trauma.

Chapter Notes

10/06/24: Edited! This one was actually the easiest to edit so far. Unlike hinted later in the note (the original parts), the Codex is not currently up to date. I'll be adjusting this later when it is.

Wooo! Chapter 3! I really enjoyed writing this chapter and Abigail's headspace. I'm a couple of chapters ahead (I got really stuck on chapter 5), but so far I've enjoyed writing her the most.

As I said before, if you find any mistakes, please let me know and I'll go back through and edit them. I've also started a Codex for all of you that don't have a lot of experience with Dragon Age (although some of you that do might be interested anyway). I'm a bit of a lore buff for the series, but there are plenty of people far more experienced than I; The Codex is just a collection of relevant blurbs about terms I may throw around and as I go, I will expand on some terms more in-depth. I'm posting Codex chapters the night before I post those in the main parts of the series so people aren't caught unawares.

For Dragon Age fans wondering about the timeline, this story started (aka Will in the Marlowes' home) on the first of Kingsway/Parvulis in the year 9:32. So, Hawke had already gone on the Deep Roads expedition and returned, and the Warden-Commander has confronted Morrigan. This particular chapter begins on 13 Harvestmere/Frumentum.

Enjoy!

Mana. Ma Halani: Help me

It had taken several weeks, but Will eventually managed to save up enough money helping the herbalist and the Seekers to get a shack on the edge of Red Crossing. It was small, homey even, but more importantly it was his. It had only cost a small sum per week, which made it so that he no longer lived in that little inn at the whim of the Seekers. It seemed that at the moment, they were staying in the area. If he needed to leave, it wouldn’t be a real hardship to pack up at a moment’s notice either: he didn’t leave much there.

He didn't exactly like having to pay weekly rent, but because there was a chance that he could need to drop everything at any moment and go (whether to escape or at the bidding of the Seekers), he couldn't blame his subletter. It could be worse; Will almost had to approach Lord Froideveaux directly about getting a space in Red Crossing, with him being the Lord of the area. Sure, he could go to Comte Lecter instead, but Lord Froideveaux would probably resent it… and it was possible that Comte Lecter would ask him to stay with him or give him somewhere for free.

Honestly, that seemed to be worse. Going around the local Lords using an illegal subletter seemed the better option. He also didn't have to keep his dogs in a stable anymore. That was nice.

Will wasn't left alone entirely - Seeker Katz came to visit him often. By this point, she actively told him to call her Beverly out loud rather than just in his head. She enjoyed his little one room shack and often played with his hounds. Winston liked her especially. They shared information with each other, honestly more than he was expecting. As it turned out, they were not so different.

Beverly being a half-elf meant they often spent a lot of time discussing elven culture. Jack tried to stress her human half in public if anyone found out so that those in charge didn't suspect (or if they knew didn't say anything). She had been raised in the Alienage and was lucky that those around her treated her as if she was their own. That was rare for elves according to Beverly; oftentimes they took a half-elf as bad news and shut them out for their ability to be mobile or the unfortunate implication of their existence.

They talked about being elves and shared stories about their experiences. He told her about being Dalish and she told him about the Alienage. Will also told her about the time that he lived with the Avvar for almost a couple of years, which she found fascinating. It was nice to feel this kind of kinship to someone; it hadn't happened to him in a long time, if ever.

Most mornings though, Will was alone. He didn't mind, he had his Mabari. This morning though, he glanced out the window to see a young woman in Chantry frock approaching his little shack. It wasn't until he was outside, that he felt a bit less combative.

"Good morning," Sister Alana Bloom said.

He was suddenly very aware that he was in his sleep clothes. Will had originally come out in them in order to scare the poor soul that had decided to speak to the 'savage Dalish' and convert them to the Maker, but now he just felt awkward.

"Sorry, I just now noticed you," he replied awkwardly. "I'm compelled to go cover myself."

She smiled, "I have brothers." Honestly that didn't help. Or mean much. This was a very different situation entirely (or at least he hoped). "I'll go get dressed all the same. I don't have much, so I can fix you up some tea if you were here to stay and chat."

"That sounds wonderful," she said, shivering slightly in the crisp autumn air. "I would also love to meet your hounds. Beverly speaks highly of their behavior."

Will chuckled. “I would hope so, even though she has been trying to teach them bad habits.” He opened the door and gestured inside as she walked around rocks and fallen branches. “What exactly brought you here?”

“Abigail Hobbs just woke up.”

Everything halted. “You know how to bury the lead,” he said.

She smirked. “Still want that cup of tea?”

“No. I would like to get dressed,” he replied. Abigail was awake. He needed to see her.

“Let’s have that cup of tea.”

The both of them went inside, him a little more reluctantly than her. He got dressed in some rather plain clothing, opting to keep his leathers off for the moment. Better to keep the conversation casual. He offered her a chair at the dingy table that he had acquired and brewed the tea in silence. It wasn’t long before that he heard a screech from outside and something scratching or tapping at his door. Alana left him to brew the tea.

Buster nuzzled his leg after she left, trying to calm him. This whole mess was absolute shit and the both of them knew it. He cursed Fen’Harel for giving him what he wanted and then putting an obstacle in the way. It was just like the Dread Wolf.

Alana came back in reading a piece of parchment. “It’s Jack,” she said and rolled it back up. “He wants you to go see her.”

“And you don’t,” he retorted.

She closed her eyes and sat back at the table, fingers steepled in a prayer for patience. “Eventually, I would like you to. It could help to take a step forward. Should help.”

“Help who?” Will wondered aloud. He poured the tea into two chipped cups and brought them to the table. She opened her eyes and leaned forward, wrapping a hand around the one placed in front of her. While Will took a sip of his warm drink, something to calm his nerves, Alana left hers undrunk.

“When you see Abigail, and I do think you should see her, I want it to be on your terms.” He tilted his head at her, confused but allowing her to continue at her own pace. “I want you to get what you need, Will,” she continued. “I would also like for Abigail to get what she needs. I’m not as concerned about Jack.” She finally took a sip of the tea and hummed her appreciation. It was nice that someone liked it. To him, it only tasted bitter and grassy. It would need to be steeped for less time when he made it next. She swallowed and put the cup back down. “I don’t want to get in-between you and Jack, but if I can be a buffer…”

“I like you as a buffer,” WIll interrupted. He did. “I also like the way you rattle Jack. He seems to see you as this formidable thing and respects you far too much to yell at you.” A swift chuckle punctuated a manufactured pause. “No matter how much he may want to.”

“And I take advantage of that,” she added, smiling at the assessment. It must be hard to yell at her anyway. Where she seems soft, she is resolute; where she seems hard, she is caring.

“Abigail Hobbs doesn’t have anyone,” he stated. He knew what it was like, he knew it when he saw it.

“You can’t be her everyone,” she said, and she had a point. He wished that she didn’t.

“I should keep my distance?”

Alana paused, looking like she wanted to say something, but she stopped. She always seemed to speak her mind, so it was worrying. “When I said what I was going to say in my head, it sounded insulting. I’ll find another way to say it.”

“Say it the insulting way,” Will quietly demanded. If it was the first thing she thought of, she probably believed it more than any other word that would come into her mouth on the matter.

She hesitated, probably not wanting to hurt her friend. “Dogs keep a promise a person can’t.

“I’m not collecting another stray!” he scoffed. She was right; it was insulting.

She nodded and he could almost hear a slight hint of ‘I warned you’.

“I get it,” he commented before she could speak again. “I can trust a dog to be a dog, but I have no idea what Abigail Hobbs is like. She could hate elves for all I know. “

Alana laughed. “Let’s hope not, for your sake.” After her guffaws died down she stared straight into Will’s eyes. “The first person that she talks to about what happened cannot be anyone that was there.” Before he could huff and puff, she let out an exhausted sigh. “That means no Comte Lecter too, as much as he thinks he can do anything because of his money.”

“Much less the guy that killed her father.” Alana placed a hand on Will’s clasped ones in between them. A gentle touch. “Let me reach out to her in my own way,” she said, before standing up and setting down the barely touched tea. A few moments later, she gathered her things and exited, leaving him there with his thoughts and his hounds.

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Sister Alana Bloom was trying her best to be as gentle as possible with the poor girl; she had been through a lot and what she experienced would leave more scars than just the one on her neck. Freshly cleaned, Abigail Hobbs looked like any other girl her age, except that her eyes were wide and confused, wounded by her experience.

“Hello Abigail. I’m Sister Alana Bloom.”

She looked quizzical. “You’re a member of the Chantry? I haven’t seen you with a lot of the other Sisters during services.”

“I’m a lay sister. I did chant with the others on occasion, but mostly my time is spent taking care of the younger children,” Alana explained, hoping the girl would understand.

“Okay.”

“I also have only been with the Chantry for the last year or so.”

Abigail nodded. “That makes sense.”

Alana moved over to the chair by the bed and sat down to speak with the girl. Oftentimes the young women she met that had faced abuse or trauma did not like being hovered over. It didn’t work for everyone, but the hope was to be the least intimidating kind of experience. The movement pushed both of them to hold their breath, before Abigail felt comfortable enough to speak again.

“I asked the other sisters if my parents were dead and they refused to tell me. One of them said that as your charge I had to wait for you.”

Alana understood why the other sisters would do that. It would build trust between the two of them. It seemed cruel, however, to keep such information from someone who would and should be grieving. Holding her in such suspension couldn’t help. “I’m sorry you had to wait.”

Abigail ducked her head, looking slightly ashamed and sad. “I know they’re dead. Were they burned?”

Some part of Alana felt relief that Abigail knew about her parents’ deaths, but the fact that she deceived the others could be a bad sign. That being said, it could also just be a learned behavior, a product of living with her father for as long as she had. Even if she didn’t know what he was, Alana could imagine that her life at home wasn’t smooth. Obscuring how much information you had was a powerful tool in getting others to behave as you wished.

“Your mother was cremated,” she explained. “But many people were uncomfortable with the idea of sending your father to the Maker in such a fashion. As far as I know, they have been keeping him preserved until someone decided what they wished to do with him.”

“Because he was crazy?”

A beat passed between the two of them. “The sisters said that you didn’t remember.”

“I remember; I just didn’t want to talk to them about it. I know I need to talk about it with you though, you’re my keeper.” She motioned to the book on the stand near the bed. Alana had almost forgotten that she had left it here. “Is that your book?”

“Yes; I was reading it to you.” She nodded.

“I thumbed through it. It was almost like I had read it before. I remember your voice and dreaming about a wolf with blue eyes. But those are Dalish tales… why did you have them?”

“A friend of mine is Dalish. I wanted to read them to understand him better and it seemed like a good opportunity.”

“A friend?” Abigail asked, seeming amused. Alana really didn’t want to talk about Will with a young girl who wouldn’t understand how complicated it was. That, and he did kill her father. She had no clue how she would react to that.

“Just a friend.” Thankfully, Abigail dropped the topic.

A moment’s pause passed between the two once more. It felt like it should have been awkward, but it just managed to not be. It was simply that both of them had reasons for not wanting to talk. Finally: “I suppose my parents’ house is mine now? I want to sell it. I could use the money to start a new life, maybe even find an apprenticeship…” she trailed off, noticing the small bundle that Alana had brought with her. “What is that?”

“Some clothes. I had to guess some of your measurements, but we managed to get some from the tailor. They might be a bit large, so if you need it taken in, we can go back. There are a few other books as well. Not so many Dalish tales, but I tried to get a variety of genres,” replied Alana.

“Your books?” Abigail looked skeptical.

“Yes, but we can always find more. Luckily, this may be a small town, but there is a local bookshop.”

“I know.” That was slightly condescending of her, Alana supposed. Abigail may be a girl, but she had lived at least near Red Crossing. She knew the town as well as any small farm girl could and was clearly educated by her family.

She decided to apologize. “Of course. I’m sorry that I forgot.” After a moment she continued, “Perhaps we can discuss the books; I haven’t had time to read them lately, but with you reading them, I might have the determination to actually finish one.”

This prompted a small chuckle and a smile. “Probably says something about you.”

Alana smiled back, “Probably does.”

After her visit with Abigail, Sister Alana knew that she needed to confront the Seeker. The man in question was sitting in one of the back benches of the Chantry sanctuary. Comte Lecter was accompanying him, which meant that Will was going to be discussed alongside Abigail. She didn’t yet know the man’s relationship with Will and how he treated him, but hopefully he would agree with Alana. It would be nice to have someone else be his defender too and she could focus on helping Abigail.

She motioned for the men to follow her to the quarters meant for the Lay Brothers and Sisters. It wouldn’t do to have it out in the middle of the sanctuary. Once they were inside a quiet room and the door shut, she was gleefully proven right by the Maker.

“I have seven families waiting, no, **demanding** that we find what is left of their daughters, and Abigail Hobbs is the only person who might know the truth!” Seeker Crawford said. It

was just on the verge of shouting, booming because of his voice rather than any intent to be loud.

“You can’t ask her right now, Seeker! She’s only just survived this and woke up in a strange place. We need to give her somewhere safe so that she can be comfortable enough to answer your questions,” she retorted. The man put up a hand to stop her and she knew this could be a problem. Seekers of Truth already had so much authority in the Chantry; if she didn’t do this the right way, she would end up being overruled. Then where would Abigail be?

“I respect your sympathy and willingness to provide compassion for a young woman such as young Hobbs, Sister Bloom,” he paused with an unpleasant look in his eye. “I hope you’ll appreciate my lack.”

As much as she wasn’t happy with the situation, Alana understood Seeker Crawford. The man saw only a potential accomplice or a witness, neither of which were very much in Abigail’s favor. The man was only trying to do his job, however messy it may be. “I do appreciate it, Seeker Crawford.” He nodded.

“You must understand. We only found one body out of eight, the rest were eaten.”

“Seven sisters in Abigail’s mind,” piped up Comte Lecter. “When she learns of her father’s crimes, she may link them together.”

“According to their neighbors,” Crawford replied. “She spent a lot of time up at the slaughterhouse with her father. It’s possible she already knows.”

Ridiculous! “You think she helped him!” Alana accused.

The fact that the reply came so calmly was patronizing. “It is a possibility that needs to be ruled out. Besides, if she didn’t help him, she may know who did.”

“How was Abigail? When you saw her?” asked his Lordship. Thankfully someone was focused on the person rather than her use.

“Surprisingly practical,” she had to admit though.

“Suspiciously practical?” and of course that would be where Crawford jumped.

Luckily, his Lordship came to her aid. “I would suggest that she can be practical without being a murderer.”

Now came the most important observation. She didn’t like pointing this out, but Abigail was doing it. “I think she might be hiding something.”

“It might simply be the trauma of the event.”

“Yes, and that is what I firmly believe, but Seeker Jack Crawford wants to hear my whole opinion.” She gritted her teeth around the word ‘seeker’. “Could also be more. She has a penchant for manipulation and withheld information to gain information. She demonstrated only enough emotions to prove she had them.”

“Appreciating my lack of sympathy?”

“I am only suggesting that she may have had reason to develop this way,” argued Alana. “Many of the people that I have seen behave like this were victims of abuse.”

“And it might be more?” asked the Comte.

“Perhaps.”

They were all quiet for a moment. The Seeker broke through the silence. “I want Will to talk with her.”

“Jack! Not yet!”

“Sister Bloom,” began Crawford. “You may be the one watching out for Abigail, but on this matter, I will refer back to Comte Lecter. He is Will’s sponsor after all.”

“Yes, I am,” replied the Comte, who shifted enough that Alana wondered if he might be uncomfortable. She had never known the man to be such, but there was a first time for everything. “It is important to note, however, that I am not entirely objective on this matter either. Will and I saved her life.”

“Then who better to make a safe place for her to answer questions?”

Alana barely restrained herself from screaming in fury.

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Abigail would be the first to admit that she was having a difficult time adjusting to her new situation. The Chantry Sisters as a whole were wonderful and encouraging, especially Sister Alana, but many of them still seemed to alternate between handling her with kid gloves or avoiding her when they didn’t have to speak with her. If she could leave the bed without supervision, she would. As it was, she had been informed that she could not explore or leave the room for extended periods of time. It chafed, the confinement and immobility. The young woman was used to exploring the forests or helping around the house, not laying in bed all day.

It had only taken one day, but the walls were already suffocating her. Just when she thought she might scream just to make something happen, the door had opened and let in a woman with bright ginger hair wearing **overly** ornate clothing. It was bright and frilly, and Abigail could just barely see stitches where the clothing had needed several repairs, not being meant for the road. The woman had introduced herself as Freddie Lounds.

“So you’re not a Sister or a healer?”

“What makes you say that?” Freddie asked, a little too shortly.

Abigail rolled her eyes; it seemed like it should be obvious. “You don’t look like one.”

“I’m a bard,” Freddie replied, which made her feel so much better, knowing that one of those was in the room with her. It’s not everyday that someone meets a spy for the nobles. Freddie continued, “I don’t operate like most bards. I find that the court keeps its eyes closed too readily. I tell them the truth, and that’s what I’m here for. I want to tell your truth.”

“You want to tell the truth, but you obviously lied to get in here.”

“Sometimes that relies on a bit of deception. But I will never lie to you.”

Plenty of people had lied to her already, and someone that she just met expected implicit trust? “Sounds like something a liar would say.”

The red-headed woman feigned sympathy. Abigail could practically smell her smugness. “You have every reason not to trust me, but in time, Abigail, I hope you let me prove that you can.” It reeked of falsity. “If you tell me what you know, I can help you fill in the blanks.”

“Why not tell me what *you* know?” asked Abigail, equal parts curious and furious. The bard nodded. It was a small one and looked like someone conceding. Abigail didn’t know whether she should be comforted by that or not.

“Your father was the Red Crossing Shrike. Your mother wasn’t the first person that your father murdered. He killed eight young women; all of them looked-”

“Just like me,” Abigail finished. She knew. She didn’t want to though.

“Yes,” Freddie sighed quietly back. She hadn’t broken eye contact with Abigail.

“Why did they call him the Shrike?” she asked back. Her voice was a soft wisp of air.

“It’s a bird that impales its prey, harvests its organs to eat later.”

It hurt to hear. Belief is the hardest thing sometimes. “He ate them?”

Pity flashed on Freddie’s face. It was fake, she knew. She was a bard, however, and trying to call one out on something like that was usually a bad idea. “He was sick.”

“Does that mean that I’m sick too?” Abigail asked. It was exactly what the bard wanted to hear, and she knew it. Abigail had not survived her father to lose now. She had to build connections. Find allies. A bard would not be her first choice, but right now it could mean her safety. Giving Freddie a little of what she wanted and allowing herself to embrace what her situation meant right now would help.

It also helped that the question was a genuine one.

“You’ll be fighting that perception.” The woman crossed over and perched on the end of the bed, bird-like in her scrutiny. “How others see you is the most important thing in your life right now.”

The proximity was an irritant; she would move away if it wouldn’t be a sign of weakness. At least Freddie wasn’t touching her. Everything was still screaming inside and she couldn’t

handle it right now. “I don’t care what anyone thinks,” she asserted, despite the fact that it was very untrue.

“Start caring, Abigail!” she pressed. “What you remember, what you say, what you do… all of it is going to direct the rest of your life.” The bard placed a delicate hand on her leg over the blankets, and a little part of Abigail died. “Let me help you.”

“Help me what?” Abigail asked, already knowing the answer.

“I,” and here Freddie paused for effect. “I can help you carve a path. You need something to help you survive what your father did… and not be blamed for his deeds in the process.”

There was a question that burned within Abigail. “How did they catch him? I don’t remember much about it.”

The ginger’s face fell. It was strange to see an actual serious expression overtake the woman’s countenance, even if it felt as false as the fur adorning her collar. “A mage. His name is Will and he has been aiding the Seekers with crimes that the Templars and guards have found difficult. He is very powerful and very insane.” She glanced away towards a man that was now entering the room before leaning in to loudly whisper, “I won’t be surprised if they make him Tranquil. He is too dangerous to be left as is.”

“Would you excuse us, please?” said the young man. He was scrappy with a small bit of scruff and blue eyes. She had never seen facial hair on an elf before, although calling it facial hair was generous.

Freddie stood her ground, making a grand gesture to the room as another man entered behind the elf. “I’m not leaving you alone with her.”

He bypassed the woman and neared the bed, still managing to keep a careful distance. He looked like he had just eaten something disgusting. “Hello Abigail. I’m Will and I work with the Seekers.”

“Ha! Work with?” Freddie guffawed. “Only so they don’t cart him off to a Circle where he belongs.”

The other man, who looked much more regal than Freddie even while his finery was understated in comparison, looked at her placidly. “I must insist you leave the room.”

She glanced back at the poor girl. “If you want to talk, find me at The Dancing Fox Inn, just ask for Freddie,” she suggested as she was silently ushered out of the room.

Will seemed to be staring at every point in the room but her. He gestured to the regal man, “This is Comte Lecter; do you remember us?”

“I remember you,” Abigail responded, irritated at the way that everyone had been treating her thus far. She wasn’t an idiot and, at this point, she wasn’t a child. A quick twist of the blade and, “You killed my dad.” Suddenly the space behind her head was far more interesting to

him than her. The Comte let an unamused look seep onto his face. “You have been asleep for a long time, Abigail. Perhaps we should take a walk, if you feel up to it.”

Anything was better than the room. With some help getting out of bed and the two men allowing her to lean on them, she managed to make it as far as the courtyard, before she needed to rest.

The courtyard itself was painted with the colors of autumn. Red, orange and yellow sprung from the air and the surrounding brown and ugly gray. She knew she should not be so critical of the people caring for her. They did what they could with what they had. Religious folk rarely were prone to fits of extravagance, unless they were in the capital or Halamshiral.

Will bowed his head to her, once they sat her on the bench. It irritated her that they were so far above her head, it brought on a strange bout of feeling crushed. As he bowed his neck, his knees did too; he was closer to her now and less imposing. His Lordship remained unreachable.

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t save your mother,” he whispered. There was no one else in the courtyard at this time, the unnatural stillness smothered his words rather than enhancing them. “She was already gone by the time I got to her.”

“I know,” she replied. “I saw him kill her.”

He looked horrified. “You saw it?”

The mind did funny things. She could remember seeing it, almost, but she knew that she had run to the kitchen when it had happened… but she felt it. Abigail was never there when the act took place, but it was an intimate part of her.

“It was sort of like seeing it,” she described.

“There was no vocabulary for your mind to articulate the violence of the act,” chimed in his Lordship. He had plucked the words from her- she was grateful.

“The whole thing seems like a dream,” she tried to explain. The difficulty of it made her hands twitch. Will seemed to notice and gently handed her some bits of twine; he did it carefully, without even brushing her. She smiled and began braiding it in her hands, giving them something to do gave her words again. “This whole thing. It was like waking up from a nightmare, but one of the ones that seem so real. You feel violent emotions and know it is real, even when something protests inside you. Even as the events fade away, the emotion stays until you can push it away.”

“But you can’t push it away,” finished Will.

“It’s real, but I wish it was just a dream. A very vivid dream.” She gasped a breath in and released it slowly, evenly. Once more and her heart calmed. Anything that she said could be helpful or dangerous. Abigail used to be able to tell which was which. “What made it the most dream-like of all? He was loving right up until the moment he wasn’t.” She shrugged helplessly. “He just kept telling me that he was sorry, to just hold still… He was going to

make it all go away," the end trailed off as she tried not to look at either of them. If they pitied her, she didn't think she could stand it.

"There was plenty wrong with your father, Abigail, but there's nothing wrong with you," said Will. "You said he was loving, and I believe it. That's what you brought out in him." It was stuff like this that she could tell would make her want to hate him. It felt familiar: the anticipation of wanting to hate someone and not being able to.

"That's not all," Abigail replied.

The taller man, the Comte, hovered over her shoulder. "Did he tell you about the young women he murdered?"

She was about to give him a rather scathing answer when Will cut in with: "You don't have to answer that right now, if you don't want to." She got the feeling that *he* didn't want her to either.

"But we will have to ask you those questions eventually." Well, at least his Lordship was honest.

Abigail wished that her parents could take her away, protect her, defend her, like Will was attempting to do. It struck her then, the permanence of her situation. She couldn't go hunting with her dad anymore. Her mother wasn't going to be able to listen to her rant about Marissa or Malcolm down the street. Dad wouldn't be asking her to help with the supplies for the apothecary. Mom wouldn't take her to the farmers' market or tailor, wouldn't be able to whisper secrets with her back and forth.

She was alone.

"I'm going to be messed up, aren't I?"

The hovering became contact. "We'll help you with the nightmares."

"What happened to you? It bothers me a lot," her new defender said. She wasn't sure that she liked calling him that. "There's no such thing as getting used to something like that. I relive it over and over, and I can't imagine how it might be haunting you." He looked down and away. The blue of his eyes trailing to the floor, ashamed to look at the other brunette. "I worry about nightmares too."

They were a lot alike. Abigail wondered if he noticed. "Do you have nightmares about killing him?"

He nodded. "It's hard for me to dream about anything else."

"Is it really that bad… killing someone? Even if you have to?"

"It's the-" he whispered. Will paused, collecting wayward and scattered thoughts so that it was practically audible. She wondered if the scratching in his head was loud to him too, or if he was so used to it that it didn't matter anymore. "It's the ugliest thing in the world."

Would she have described what happened as ugly? The way her dad had pulled her in, used her as bait to kill eight young women, certainly felt ugly. The fact that she agreed to it… what did that make her? She gathered herself together and waited for him to look at her again. Abigail refused to continue if he would try to ignore her. It took a few moments, but he did.

“I want to go home,” she declared. They both knew there was no way for him to refuse.

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Leaving the Chantry meant facing the incredulity that was Freddie Lounds. She sat back in almost garish clothing and with a smirk on her face. It made Will’s skin crawl just to look at her. The sun was high and it left beads of sweat sticking to his skin. A raw feeling was behind his teeth and on the tip of his tongue.

“Ah! You must be the Dalish mage, Will. I’m sorry for not introducing myself earlier. I’m Freddie, Freddie Lounds.” She stuck out her hand and spoke slower around him, as if doubting his ability to speak common, despite hearing him speak perfectly just a short time ago.

He ignored her. Her smirk became wider.

“Please. Let me apologize for my behavior in there. It was sloppy and misguided.” She paused for a moment, judging his face. The smirk relaxed slightly. “And hurtful.”

Comte Lecter, whom Will had almost forgotten was there as well, decided that now would be a wonderful time to put his two coppers in. “Madame Lounds, I do not believe that now is the time.”

She seemed slightly put off by the man in front of her, but continued on savagely. “Look, we may have our differences and we may have different reasons for being here, but we also both genuinely care about what happens to her.” There was no need to elaborate… and why should he cooperate with her?

“You told her I was insane,” Will spat.

“I can undo that,” came the response and the fact that she said it so assuredly and coolly just made his skin itch.

“So you help Abigail see me as more than her father’s killer and I do what?” he asked, because there was always a catch. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Will was very aware that with the exception of that one comment, Comte Lecter had not said a word.

“I said I can undo it, Messere Will. I can also make it much worse.”

A fire filled him. “Madame Lounds, you of all people should know. It’s not very smart to piss off a mage, especially one that consorts with spirits and thinks about killing for a living.

She smiled.

“It’s not very smart to piss off a mage that consorts with spirits and thinks about killing for a living. Would you like to know what else isn’t smart?” asked Jack Crawford. He turned to Comte Lecter. “You were there with him, and you let those words come out of his mouth.”

The three of them and Sister Alana Bloom were sitting together in the guard-captain’s office in the barracks. Comte Lecter looked clearly out of place among the less than pristine surroundings, fine clothes simply begging to have mud or rust brush against them. “I trust Will to speak for himself,” his Lordship sighed. Clearly the man had been expecting the tirade from Crawford. When Freddie Lounds had passed a pamphlet to the town crier so that every person in Red Crossing now knew what Will had said, he had known that Jack Crawford would catch wind of it. She had been quick about it too, not bothering to get anything printed and just handing out handwritten articles to people more than happy to shout it to the town for a few silvers. Will would admit that it wasn’t his finest moment.

“Evidently you shouldn’t.” Will resented that.

“I’m simply pleased that Abigail Hobbs wasn’t being hanged on her word,” piped in Alana. She looked far more comfortable in the space, which seemed incongruous with the Chantry frock that she wore. Her headpiece was sagging slightly with the humidity, but luckily it wasn’t one of the tall hats that fully-fledged Chantry Sisters usually wore; that would have been drooping onto the table by now.

“Then it’s a victory,” proclaimed Seeker Crawford. If possible, he looked even more unhappy. He looked thoughtful for a moment, before he said what he was thinking to the group. “You said that Abigail Hobbs wants to go home. Let’s take her home.”

“What we want,” added Alana, “isn’t always what we need. She’s safe for now, Jack. Taking her out of the Chantry, a controlled and predictable environment, is extremely reckless.”

He glared, but didn’t yell. “I thought you said she was practical.”

Alana almost did. “Just because someone is practical does not mean that you need to test their limits!”

The Comte chimed in, “She could be simply disconnecting the experience from herself, making it like it didn’t happen to her.”

“Which is why we don’t need to take her home! She could have a fit of some sort or re-enact the event.”

Admittedly, Will felt rather outside of the whole conversation. They were talking around him, but he didn’t really have anything to add. He just wanted to see her again, to take care of her. Despite this inner urging, he knew just how bad of an idea that was; Abigail hadn’t responded well to him earlier.

He came back to the conversation as his Lordship was discussing the positives of taking the poor girl back to her home; he had heard his name.

“-If she sees Will as her savior and he doesn’t meet her expectations, she could transfer rage toward her father onto him.”

He sunk into his seat. “He’ll deal with it,” said Jack. He appreciated the vote of confidence, but Will didn’t really know if he would. Jack continued, “I want to know if Will is right about the copy.”

“What about him?” asked Comte Lecter.

Alana explained what he had told Jack the day before, “Will believes that the murderer of Cassie Boyle managed to contact Garrett Hobbs prior to Will getting there.” He appeared deep in thought at this news.

“Magic then?”

“How else?” To be fair, he hadn’t said magic. Will wasn’t sure if he believed that, but there weren’t many alternatives.

“Jack,” Alana stopped after she said his name. She hesitated for a moment. “You may not be getting what you want by sending her home. We have no idea what is waiting for her there.”

Jack nodded in acknowledgement, but left the chair and the room soon after. The three sat, knowing that the man was too stubborn to let this go.

A small part of Will didn’t know if that was a bad thing or not.

…...

SCENE 7

If Freddie Lounds was a bit more self-aware, she would notice that perhaps this was a bit of an over-reaction to the way that Will had greeted her, but nothing would change if she didn't act. The court was a fickle thing and if something absolutely astonishing didn't come of this, her pamphlets would be back to replacement kindling, So, she had set up a meeting with Nicholas Boyle in a dingy tavern near the outskirts of the town.

"My thanks again for agreeing to meet with me. I know that the grieving process is great and this must have been difficult for you," she attempted to placate him. She kept a soft smile on her face to appear sincere. People liked to hear you understanding their grief. It was much more socially acceptable than pity, even when the same people would despise it under another name. Even delivering false condolences was far better than being called out on a lie. Pity did have its uses though. Grief did take many forms and that meant some people enjoyed the feeling of righteous indignation that came from it.

"How would you know?" he grumbled. It was going to be the latter then. At least that gave her something to work with.

"I have been writing about Garrett Hobbs since the beginning. I was bringing attention to the matter in the court."

"For all the good that did," he muttered under his breath. She decided to ignore it.

"You aren't the only relative of one of his victims that I've spoken with."

"So what?" he growled. "Garrett Hobbs is dead! He deserved worse, but what's done is done."

"No small comfort?" Freddie goaded. If she wanted this done right, he had to be the right kind of angry.

"Comfort?" Nick shouted, startling several nearby patrons of the tavern. A few of them moved away to not anger the boy, and that seemed to catch his attention. He had begun to rise out of the chair, but he sat back down and attempted to relax his body. His voice was a whisper, "My sister was impaled on a severed halla head. He pulled her lungs out while she was still breathing. There's no comfort in that."

The emotion almost made her feel bad. Almost. "I am sorry, truly, but you have to try not to remember her that way."

He stirred and looked at her, straight on. "What do you want from me?"

More clever than she gave him credit for. He would do nicely.

She gave the most innocent smile that she could muster. "I just thought you should know that Abigail Hobbs woke up."

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Abigail glanced around the place that used to be her family's quiet little home. It was completely still now, waiting for destruction. The only exception to this untouched surreality was on the front walls of the house. Painted there was the word 'cannibals' in vivid red. Her skin crawled along her bones, muscles tensing and untensing. There was a spray of blood on the rocks leading up to the front door.

She paused. "I sort of expected an outline of a body or something. Anything really to mark the fact that my mom was here."

Will was looking away again. Always working so hard to look anywhere but her. "Wanting something more tangible is understandable, but you mark your mother's existence, Abigail."

"Her name was Louise," she said. Somebody ought to know. It was a name that deserved to be said aloud, as often as possible. It was wrong for the world to remember her father, but struggle even thinking of her mother. She leaned down to the legacy her mother left, painting small bits of the walls red. The rest was already washed away. "Goodbye mom." It was sad in a way. Nobody would look at her and think of the woman that raised her, only her father. She was going to be defined by him for the rest of her life.

It was far from a comforting thought.

Sister Alana placed a hand on her shoulder. The weight of it kept her from floating away like the space in her lungs wanted her to do. "If you want to go, you just have to say so," she reassured.

"Go where?" the brunette scoffed. "Back to the Chantry?"

The look on the Sister's face made her feel uncomfortable. "I'm sorry; I know it is a place of comfort for a lot of people and a home to many others, but…"

"It isn't *your* home," Sister Alana finished for her. It was nice that she didn't have to say it. People wanted her to say a lot lately, and they didn't always listen. The group went inside.

The dust in the house was heavy. It permeated the air and coated the lungs. Along with it came the ash, the fire that had been in the house had long since burned down, but nobody had cleaned it. Everything else was exactly the way that they left it. She wandered over to the cooking area where the ash had mixed with her blood and preserved it. It was chalky and black, staining the wood. "Is that mine?"

"Yes."

Turning to him, Abigail attempted to study Will's face. It was carefully blank.

"You do this all the time? Commune with the spirits about murderers?

He nodded.

"They helped you learn about my dad?"

He nodded again, but she could tell he wasn't saying something. It took a moment, but he elaborated, "Other people like your dad, too." The air passed between them, a silent acknowledgement of the result of something like that.

"What did they say?"

He looked puzzled. "It's not that they necessarily say anything. Sometimes they do. It's more like-" Gathering his words, he took a deep breath. "It's more like they feel at you. They fill you with so much emotion that it's hard to describe or interpret."

"I don't think I understand," she replied.

"Spirits… They're born out of this world and reflect it back," the elf explained. "When strong emotions exist, they take form."

"So, that means you felt what my dad felt."

"More or less."

What exactly did her father feel that made him do what he did? What about her made him feel that way?

"What was it like?"

"It felt like a shade of reality overtook me, spoke to me; A ghost inhabited my skin alongside me."

She couldn't imagine it. It sounded frightening. "You make it sound like he became a part of you." He was startled at her words and immediately looked guilty. She huffed a small laugh, trying to break some of the tension. "No wonder you have nightmares."

"We should discuss yours," interrupted the Comte. She had been tracking him through the room as he glided through the space. The more he was around, the more she knew that he was who she had suspected since she first heard him speak.

Will took exception to what the Comte was trying to do. It was odd that a human and an elf were working together. The bared hostility seemed to work a bit better, even if it was just a regular jab between partners.

"We should talk more about the situation. Both you and your mother were attacked in a very different manner than anyone else your father killed. It was sloppy, rushed. Your dad knew we were coming before we arrived. We think that someone told him" Your father, your dad; were they trying to say something?

"Someone did, I think," she replied. She could sense his Lordship's stare searing her face. "We had just walked up to the apothecary when a man in a cloak pulled him aside. They whispered before he left. Dad immediately turned around without even speaking to Eloise, so I thought maybe something had happened at the house or someone important was visiting soon."

“The apothecary?” Will asked. “Did you see his face? Recognize his voice?”

She shook her head. “He kept the cloak over his clothes and face and his voice seemed odd with a strange accent. I had never heard it before.”

“No one new?”

“No.”

The Comte stopped Will from asking something else. A silent exchange passed between them and then he asked, “We think that maybe he was another killer, someone that copied your father.”

Her eyes widened. “Still out there?”

No one said anything, they didn’t need to. Sister Bloom gathered up Abigail and guided her to a seat in the living area. She remembered how mom had taken to inviting guests over and doing her best to be a part of the community. That had stopped in the last year, dad wouldn’t let her; it seemed obvious why now. Her father had been doing a lot to isolate them, keep them with him.

“Can you catch someone’s crazy? If it is strong enough to form a spirit, is it strong enough to become part of other people?”

Sister Bloom sat beside her and began to gently rub her back. “Some people say that if a belief is accepted by one’s culture then it can become natural. One’s family is especially able to do this.”

It made her want to laugh. “I don’t know if I would call this a belief more than a lifestyle. In retrospect, I can see where it was a part of our lives. He was a perfectionist, always cleaning everything. Most people would just wipe things down or burn away blood with a torch, but he would pluck each hair and nail by hand.”

“He never left anything behind.” She couldn’t tell who said it. She didn’t care.

“You brought me here to find it.”

“It was a bonus to helping you through your trauma,” assured Sister Bloom.

“Are we going to re-enact it?” she asked. This was her chance. A point to Will, “You be my dad.” Sister Bloom, “You be my mom.”

She finished with the Comte, “You be the messenger.”

Message sent.

“Please Abigail,” Sister Bloom begged. “We want you to leave it all behind, move past it.”

They didn’t understand. “You mentioned helping you find evidence. You won’t. Anything my dad didn’t take to the apothecary, he used every bit. Pillows and glue, tools and knives.

Anything left is probably in the walls and mattresses."

"Where did he do this?"

Bonding with her father, hunting deer. The place was stained now, bad memories bleeding into the floors. "At the cabin. I could show you."

"Abigail," stopped Sister Bloom. She turned to notice a young woman walking in the room. "Marissa?" she asked as her long time friend and neighbor stepped in.

"Hey Abigail."

Everyone scattered after that, giving her excuses to see her friend. Sister Alana ushered her out, mentioning talking to somebody besides those directly involved in the trauma somehow. It didn't feel as comforting as she probably meant it. They moved just slightly away from what was her home; the adults didn't want her to be too far away. Abigail didn't know what to say to Marissa, it felt like the last time they spoke was forever ago. A different Abigail.

"Does it hurt?" Marissa interrupted her building anxiety. It was blunt, but that was always what she liked about the other brunette.

She gently touched her neck under the wrap, resisting the urge to scratch at the thin raised line. "Sometimes."

A few more steps and Marissa added, "It was strange. I thought maybe it wasn't real, that the forests were haunted or I had been imagining a raid a little too realistically. Then I heard shouting and guards were running up to the house. Later, there was a nosy bard asking people questions, and they just couldn't wait to give their opinion."

"Did you?" It felt wrong to ask, but she still had to.

"No!" Marissa raised her voice to say. "Mother wouldn't let me leave the house after what happened, much less talk to a bard from the capital. Besides, I'm not about to tell every dirty little secret to some bitch."

"What happened to the front of the house?"

"Bunch of asses from the southern part of the town," Marissa scoffed. "Bet they had to ask their parents how to spell before they put it up."

"Marissa!"

"Look-" she stopped her. "I don't think you did it, but a lot of people do. Let me be an ass about it, because you can't."

She felt so vindicated that she could cry. While she was the bait, she had tried to be as uninvolved as possible and desperately hadn't wanted to help. Abigail had been so scared that her dad would kill her and her mom, and look how that turned out. To have someone believe in her, even if what they believed wasn't true, felt wonderful. "You don't think I did it?"

Marissa shrugged and smiled, “You don’t seem the type. Though, I didn’t think that about your father either. Maybe the hunting should have been a clue.”

“Mine or his?”

“Eh… Both, now that you mention it.” At the fall of Abigail’s face, she added. “That was a joke!”

“Was it?” came a voice nearby. A young man with ginger hair and a manic look was approaching them from the trees.

“This private property!” yelled out Marissa as she leaned to the ground to gather stones. Abigail… Abigail couldn’t move.

“You were the bait, right? Did you lure them back to daddy? How’d you get my sister?” he screamed at them. All she could do was stare as Marissa began to stomp forward.

“Piss. Off.” She hurled the stones forward one after another.

“You helped him cut out my sister’s lungs?” he cried out and then one clipped him in the face. Footsteps were thrashing through the brush behind her as her guardians rushed forward. Once he saw them too, the boy rushed off.

“Who was that?” asked Comte Lecter. Distantly she heard Will identify the young man based on what he said. Marissa’s mother came up, tripping over her dress to drag her daughter away. She remained obstinate as her mother took her home, making sure to at least say ‘bye’ and give a slight hug before departing.

Distantly, someone mentioned reporting the incident. Yes, that seemed like a good idea.

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SCENE 9

He held her in his arms and she trembled violently. "I'm so sorry Abigail!" he whispered as he pressed the knife to her neck. A warm embrace surrounded him, filling him with a twisted, painful love. "Please just hold still." She shook harder and tried to press against his arms. It was no use; he was stronger. "Please," he breathed out. "Please. I'm going to make it all go away."

He dragged the blade across her throat and her limp body fell, the thing that gave it meaning escaping into the vast ether. Her final moments, the ending, her meaning, would be with him forever.

Will woke and felt a terrible pit in his stomach. It took too long to wash the bile out of his mouth.

The next day they decided to go up to the cabin. It was a process, getting Abigail out of the Chantry without a fuss again from all of the villagers, but they managed it. They had to take a couple of different detours and ended up there later than they wanted, but even that wasn't too big of a deal.

The room of antlers was no less upsetting this time around. Will was left with the distinct feeling of wrongness and rightness warring when he saw Abigail amongst them. She belonged there, but it hurt to see it.

"He cleaned everything," Abigail said. It was spoken in monotone, a blunt statement of fact. "I thought he was just afraid of illness or contamination. He always prided himself on having good meat." She trailed a hand across the edge of a set of knives, lightly skimming the point. It was barely enough to make a scratch, let alone draw blood, but Will still remained focused on it.

Jack watched from the corner of the room nearest to the entrance. Was this his way of giving space or maintaining a presence. "No one else ever came up here with your dad?" Abigail looked up at him. "Except you of course," Jack added. "Ever help him with his trophies?" She shook her head.

"He made everything by himself. He was very adamant about it, said it gave him some space to think. Butter, remedies, glue. He took anything he got to the apothecary or sold them in town," her wandering became a slow pace around the antler room. "He made pillows. He carved knives out of leg bones." Abigail huffed a small laugh. It came out bitter. "No parts went to waste or it was murder." She cast her eyes down, "He was feeding them to us."

"It's very likely, " responded Jack, expressing some amount of pity.

Abigail spoke in a wet voice, "Before he cut my throat, he told me that he killed those girls so he…." She swallowed. "So that he wouldn't have to kill me."

Will moved forward gently, slowly raising his arm to offer comfort. She waved him off, so he tried words instead. “You’re not responsible for your father’s murders, Abigail.”

She shook her head again, violently this time. “If he would have just killed me, none of those girls would be dead.” She walked off, further into the cabin. For a moment, he saw the desire to turn back. A drop of red landed on her forehead and spread down her nose. Absently, Abigail touched the blood and her breathing sped up. Another drop fell on her, then another. She ran up the stairs and there she saw…

A body mounted on the largest of the antlers, spiraling out from where she was gored. Dark hair and a simple cloth draped to give a mockery of modesty over the otherwise nude corpse. Blood was pooling from the fingertips down to the floor, where it gathered in rivulets to spill into the room below.

“Marissa?” cried out Abigail and she began to weep. “Marissa!” and Jack moved forward to shield her away from her friend. She kept looking back, not believing what she saw, but the Seeker herded her out of the room, sparing her the sight.

Will was not so lucky.

Later, once he had thoroughly looked at the crime scene, Will found himself approached by Crawford. “Will?” the man asked. “Are you okay?”

He sighed. “I’ll admit that this wasn’t how I expected to spend my day.”

Jack looked thoughtful as he revisited the crime scene in his own head. “The young man by the stream earlier today… do you think she knew him?”

“Marissa?”

“No, I mean Abigail.” Jack paused. “I suppose I mean both of them. According to Abigail, they were very good friends growing up. Maybe they both did?”

Will turned his head slightly to look at the Seeker. “Are you thinking that he killed Marissa Schurr?”

Jack nodded. “It would make sense. He’s a new piece of the puzzle. I would suspect Abigail, but she was surrounded at the time. There’s no way she could have pulled it off.”

“I don’t think they knew him. From what I understand he was someone’s brother.”

“Cassie Boyle? She had a brother named Nicholas if what the parents said is true. He was in another town with an apprenticeship. They didn’t have the best relationship.”

“Garrett Hobbs didn’t kill Cassie Boyle,” Will extrapolated. “He would have honored every part of her, but this young man seems to think that he was the murderer.”

Jack glared at Will accusingly. “I thought that the second murderer was never going to kill this way again.”

“I may have been wrong. I’m allowed to be wrong Jack.”

They contemplated it for a moment. It was cold and night was getting closer. “As far as we know, Hobbs never hit any of the girls.”

“As far as we know,” Will pointed out. They never found any of the bodies except for the one after all.

“There was no evidence of it on Elise Nichols, but Cassie Boyle was tortured,” said Jack. The two men glanced back to the cabin where another poor girl was murdered, even after the passing of the Red Crossing Shrike. Finally, they felt comfortable enough to walk away and back towards the Hobbs’ home, but the impression of the place was stuck to their backs.

“Violence before killing is what you would call a connection?” asked Will.

Jack shrugged. “It’s that and the antler motif. We don’t have much more to go on. Both seemed vengeful and intimate. Almost like he knew them.”

“Are you suggesting...”

“You saw him longer than I, Will,” Jack interrupted. “Did he seem like the kind of person that could murder his own sister?”

“I…” Will didn’t know. The young man was desperate and angry, but he didn’t feel any auras coming off of him. He would have to sleep if he wanted a better reading, perhaps even allow himself to dream and wander through the Fade. He had a face and a presence; it was risky, but it could be worth it. Jack didn’t need to know. “I could use some time to think.”

“Do you think Abigail knew Cassie Boyle? Was that why Nicholas Boyle went to her?”

Will turned to him. “I thought we established that Abigail couldn’t have done this.”

The man shrugged. “People were there with her, that’s true, however it wasn’t like there was a guard with her the entire time. People have to sleep some time. Young women value privacy.”

“She said that she didn’t know him.”

“I understand that you haven’t quite had this experience, Will.” Said elf resented that statement. “People manipulate. They lie. I’ve seen it happen in the Grand Game all of the time. It is very possible that this young woman has the makings of a young bard, despite not being connected to nobility.”

Will frowned. “I’m nearly thirty Jack. I’ve seen enough of the world to see this. I may have been in the wilds and in the mountains, but I’m not an idiot and I still had to talk to people on occasion.”

“You just said you were wrong sometimes. I want us both to be aware of that. The set-up was identical to that of Cassie Boyle; that is our connection.”

As they got closer to the house, Will became more concerned that they wouldn't finish the conversation before they arrived. It would not do for Abigail to hear any of it. "Keep in mind, Jack, that we have very little to no evidence that Abigail was a part of it either. It is more likely that someone is targeting her rather than her being a part of it."

He nodded. "It's time that Miss Hobbs went home. I need you here, but make sure that she gets back to the Chantry safely, Will." Seeker Crawford came back and motioned for the guards and other Seekers to gather together, before leaving the young man to find his own way. Will glanced around at the chaos that was blossoming around him and sighed. This was going to be a long night.

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Because they had to report the death of Marissa Schurr to the guards, by the time it was nightfall, the whole of Red Crossing knew. People were gathered outside of the little house with torches, yelling obscenities as Abigail attempted to get back into the house.

"Abigail!" they screamed. "Did you help your father?"

"Did you know you were eating people?"

"Where is our justice?"

"Did you eat our daughters?"

"Abigail!"

"Where are they? You must know!"

"Abigail Hobbs!"

"Why did you come back?" wailed Marissa's mother as she rushed through the guards. They weren't really trying to stop her and that made it worse. "Why did you come back here? Why?"

The woman from yesterday morning was there as well, Freddie Lounds. "Abigail!" she called as his Lordship made to stop her. "Madame, I believe you should be over there."

She ignored him, "Abigail! I can help you! I've been following this from the beginning; you need me!"

Comte Lecter pushed her back into the crowd gently. Abigail heard him denying a request to meet her and then went inside, where the cacophony of voices vibrated the walls.

She was surrounded.

Everyone had to stay outside for the moment to deal with the crowd, leaving Abigail alone. She could still hear people yelling and Marissa's mother screaming abuses to the sky. They hated her. For something she could not do anything about, they hated her.

Could she have done something about it? The thought did plague her: did she doom her friend by coming back here to see her home?

She moved through the house to one of the bedrooms, her bedroom. It was the furthest point in the house from the front and managed to be complete inside, no windows. The voices were quieter here.

Abigail laid down for the moment and felt the soft pillow give under her head, but something was off. Quickly she sat up, and pressed with the pillow on her hand. Normally, she wouldn't have thought anything about it, the pillow felt the same as it always had, but ever since she realized what exactly her father had been doing… The texture and the softness felt wrong; she knew what normal pillows felt like now. Something had to be inside of it.

She dashed over to the cooking area and back to the room, yanking a knife from the woodblock as she went. Her mother had always told her not to run with knives, but her mother was gone now.

Diving at the pillow, she began ripping it open with the knife. The seams gave way to beautiful, brown, human hair. It was dry and soft on her hands and she **screamed** . The poor girl pushed away from the bed and began shaking as much of the hair off of her as she could before a small sound, a thump, came from behind her. The boy from earlier was there.

"I-I'm not gonna hurt you," he stuttered out. "I've got to talk to someone." He came in through the only door and there were no windows. He was still blocking the way out. "I didn't kill that girl." He stepped forward. "I swear I didn't…" Another. "I didn't!" She saw her chance and made for the small opening, but he grabbed her and shoved her into the wall. The blade in her hand pierced his stomach and the hands loosened. His slack expression moved to stare at the knife. He wasn't dead yet.

She yanked it up, blood splattering on her face and gushing over her hands, and he fell back. He left her.

"Abigail!" She heard a call from somewhere in the house. It was Sister Alana and it sounded like it came from the front. Abigail wasn't a murderer; she needed someone to know! "I heard screaming, are you alright? Abigail…" called Sister Alana again and a hard smack sounded. As she entered the front, she saw Sister Alana unconscious on the ground and Comte Lecter standing over her.

"Abigail," he placidly said. She always thought it was strange that he didn't have an expression. "Show me."

Leading him to the room was easy, but watching him look over her work was difficult. A small hint of pride at her ability to protect herself made itself known, so she stomped on it.

A tiny voice that she barely recognized as her own said, "He was going to kill me."

"Was he?" It was a fair question. At the time, she was sure, but he hadn't sounded angry. He sounded scared.

“This isn’t self-defense, Abigail. You butchered him.” The large slice from sternum to belly did look like the cut her father taught her to make when field dressing. His eyes did make him look like a deer.

“I-” she began, but couldn’t find the words.

The Comte loomed over her, his presence in the room was a cup brimming, about to run over. “They will see what you did and they will see you as helping your father in his butchery.” Her stomach was knotted and boiling. They would… wouldn’t they?

“I wasn’t!”

He reached over and cupped her face. Comte Lecter didn’t see her as that though, he didn’t think of her as a monster. It was a good feeling.

“I can help you, if you ask me. At great risk to my own life.” He was a noble after all, if anyone knew about this, he would be finished. “You have a choice, dear girl. You can tell them that you were defending yourself when you gutted this man…” She thought of Will. At first she had resented him, but he had been strangely protective of her. He would never look at her the same. She liked the way that he looked at her now, like she was something precious. It didn’t hold the strange threat of her father, even if sometimes it felt slightly insulting. It wasn’t the same as the acceptance from Comte Lecter, but there was something warm about it. She would never be able to be herself with him, but she could be the person she was meant to be.

“Or we can hide the body.”

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When she woke up, it was to panic and confusion. Alana was watching the guards check and recheck the premises, because there was apparently an intrusion. It wasn’t long before she was approached by Seeker Crawford and Will about what happened.

“I’m sorry Seeker, but I don’t remember. There was something, maybe, in the corner of my eye, but then nothing.”

The large man looked disgruntled. “So Nicholas Boyle attacks you, Comte Lecter, and Abigail, but no one sees him enter or exit.”

“Abigail?”

Will answered this time. “His Lordship returned her to the Chantry. I’m sure you can check on her after we have someone check you over.”

“She managed to defend herself before he got out. Blood all over her arms and knife, but hopefully we’ll find him soon. Probably bled out.”

This didn’t bode well. She didn’t know how to feel about the young man; she imagined him being more lost and confused than malicious, but you never did know with people. Two

seconds do not give a true impression of a person. Will didn't look very pleased either, keeping to himself about the matter of Crawford's opinion.

"I suppose that he won't go to a healer himself," she posited. "There aren't any in town except for at the Chantry and the apothecary and they report any suspicious wounds to the guard."

"We'll get him, Sister," she was told. She glanced behind the Seeker to Will, who was looking slightly ill about the whole thing. His protective instinct with Abigail was probably playing havoc on his nerves. When he looked like he couldn't stand it anymore, he started to leave.

"Where are you going?" demanded Jack. Will sighed and looked wearily back.

"I'm going home."

Jack's face softened and he nodded, allowing him to leave with no further argument.

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Will didn't go home immediately. The whole situation had left him out of sorts and craving some kind of conversation. So, naturally, he made his way to the Lecter estate.

His Lordship greeted him warmly and invited him in, claiming that this would easily take the place of this week's 'accountability session' should he so choose. Will didn't quite know how to take that from the man. At first it seemed like it might be a trap, but perhaps it was simply an invitation for humor. It probably was; Will seemed to arrive at the distinct impression that the Comte might secretly be quite the comedian. The conversation was fairly banal: how was he feeling, how did he wish to approach Abigail, etc. Then, Comte Lecter decided to approach a topic slightly differently.

"I've noticed that you've begun to make yourself a small place in this town. Don't worry, I won't make you leave your tenement, as much as it stung to know that you've declined to stay here for a shack." Will was glad that he said it and not foisted the burden on Will. "How do you feel having a place to call your own? As far as I'm aware, the Dalish are largely transient."

He thought for a moment before answering, "Occasionally, I will take walks in the woods by my little abode. Wandering the forests have always felt more like home to me than any house, but when I look back and see the fire and candles in the cabin, I see the aravels that carry my people from place to place. They are usually called 'landships' by non-Dalish, and when you watch them moving among the trees, you can see why."

"You are far from them now," was the reply. "Are you trying to find safe harbor, somewhere to dock?"

"I'm trying to find somewhere to go."

“You have recently gone to the Hobbs’ home, walked in the spaces that Garrett Hobbs moved through and breathed in. Did the spirits sing to you?”

Will nodded, trying to find the words. “With noise and clarity.”

“They showed you his madness and you understood it, translated it for us to comprehend.” Will could almost say the Comte sounded reverent. Almost. It was such an odd thing, someone speaking of the communion with spirits as something positive, not to be feared. Even his Clan worried that he would be possessed at any time; there was a reason that, given the first real opportunity, they had him leave.

“I tried to get to know him as best I could. I needed to see him, to hear him, to feel him. They fill you with the emotions of a person, but you have to look beyond to the why.”

“How did **you** feel when you saw Marissa Schurr?”

It was such a layered question, far more layered than the noble could possibly understand. There was only one way to describe it: “Guilty.”

“Because you couldn’t save her?”

“I felt like I killed her.” The Comte stood and began to circle the area; Will admittedly felt like he had to follow the man, but refused to move. He remained, slumped in his seat as the older man left and then returned to his seat.

“You felt accused?”

“I felt like I was him, if only for a moment. I was so immersed in him that I felt like we were doing the same things at the same time. Some part of me wonders that if I hadn’t gone, would Marissa Schurr still be alive?”

“Did this continue?”

He nodded. “Even after he was dead. Especially after.”

There was an unspoken conclusion that both men drew, but neither voiced. Will’s fragility would not allow him to speak it aloud; Acknowledgement would become reality. Awareness and manifestation becoming one and the same. Comte Lecter seemed disheartened and that almost made the whole thing worse. The man was putting so much on the line by sponsoring him; he hoped that he didn’t disappoint.

The return home felt oddly like he had taken a test and failed.

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The estate of Comte Hannibal Lecter was simultaneously more and less ostentatious than she actually expected. Earlier, after Nicholas Boyle (she later learned his name), he gave the address to her. Abigail was good at being sneaky, she and Marissa used to play pranks on the boys in their neighborhood, and her guardians had accidently shown her the easiest ways to

leave the Chantry without being caught. So, she did the only thing that she could think of and made her way to his home.

There was a surprising lack of guards, just a few to watch the entrance to the estate and scout the walls. She watched their patrols for a while before sneaking past during a brief pause where they wouldn't be able to see her. She managed to make it as far as the kitchen before she rammed into a young elf woman. The woman cocked an amused eyebrow at her, before gesturing up the stairs to the far left, partially hidden behind a shelf. "Up there is the study," she play-whispered and Abigail followed her advice

The stairs lead to a magnificent library. She had never seen so many books in her life; her limited experience had been at the local store, which only kept a few at a time, and the Chantry which had a limited number and they were all either religious texts or based on culture through the Chantry's eyes. Brother Genitivi was insightful and fascinated with the world around him, but occasionally dry and clearly came from heavy Andrastian influence.

There was no one around to stop her, so she went up the ladder to a second level overlooking the desk and comfortable seating area. Abigail found a small corner near some interesting titles and sat down to read. It's funny how books can make you feel comfortable wherever you are.

It wasn't long before the Comte arrived. His Lordship was as quiet as a mouse as he moved through the room and began rummaging through his desk. She held her breath. It wouldn't do for him to ask her to leave.

"Hello, Abigail." It surprised her. Honestly, she hadn't believed that he had noticed her. Perhaps she should have thought better of it. He did seem like a different kind of person than others. He had helped her, and that gave him a little more license than them. She didn't think that Will or Sister Alana would have; Seeker Crawford definitely wouldn't.

"How did you know that it was me?" she asked. She was pretty sure that he hadn't seen her.

"I was alerted by a messenger from the Chantry that you were missing." That made sense. They would have been able to get here before her, because they had horses and the luxury of being obvious. "Where else would you have gone?" Her first instinct was to protest, but the more she thought about it the more that she realized that it's true. It also didn't help that she didn't know where Will lived. Maybe she should look into that?

"Come down from there," he ordered and she reluctantly climbed the ladder from the second level to the main library. "I hope that you don't mind if I wonder why you are still up at this late hour."

"Why are you still up?" she retorted. Abigail tried to make it the furthest from petulant one could get, but it probably still sounded a little bratty.

He paused, "I am admittedly still worried about the incident with Nicholas Boyle."

"Worried that you'll get caught?"

“I’m worried about the repercussions for you.”

She tried to hold it in, but she could feel her throat closing up and her eyes dampening. “I didn’t honor any part of him, so it’s just murder isn’t it?” Her voice bubbled in her throat.

He approached and gently pet her hair. “Most would argue that it was self-defense.”

Glancing up, she tried to look him in the eyes rather than at his nose. “Then why not tell the truth?”

“You already know,” he replied. “Most would say that, but at this time? Some would claim that blood called to blood and that you were taking after your father.”

“Am I?” She wanted to know; maybe he could tell her.

“When people die, there is an unreality to them. They become light and air and color, no longer flesh. Perhaps our dear Will could tell us if that is what spirits are like. They are changed for you and their souls ascend to the next plane.”

“You said I butchered him,” she accused.

He raised an eyebrow. “And he was more important for the butchering. He made you strong.”

The horrifying realization dawned. “You’re glad I killed him.”

“And the alternative? I do not relish the idea of burying you instead.”

“Even you said that we weren’t sure that that was his goal,” she pointed out.

“I did say that.”

The brunette shuffled around the desk to get closer to him and accused him as gently as she could, desperate to not cause a terrible reaction. Small steps. “You were the one that gave him the message, weren’t you? I recognized your voice.”

“I saw him and asked if we could meet with him for an interview. He claimed that he was busy and could meet us later.” She didn’t sense a lie. “You can see why I didn’t say anything.”

“They think the one that spoke with him warned him… and that it was another killer.”

“I am not like your father, Abigail. You and I both know what it’s like to make a mistake, and I would rather not anyone else see my shame. It is dangerous for a noble in Orlais. I’ll keep your secret.”

It was a fair request and a demand. It would hurt him, terribly, to have this on his shoulders. He would lose a lot of credibility in the court and it might take him years to get back that prestige, if at all. Prestige in Orlais meant power, but losing it meant death. At the same time, if she was found out, death would be certain. Honestly, she got more out of the deal.

“I’ll keep yours,” Abigail acquiesced.

“Abigail,” the Comte began. “You can visit me anytime that you wish, but no more sneaking away. It is better for everyone.”

Dirthara-ma da'len

Chapter Summary

After the incident with Abigail Hobbs, our heroes find themselves with several dead families and an unfortunate implication.

Chapter Notes

08/31/24: Not yet edited

Another chapter up!

I have really mixed feelings about this one (partially because I feel a bit weird about the actual episode), but ultimately felt well enough to post it. I'm super sick while I'm editing this so here's hoping!

I'm going to go ahead and translate the chapter titles. So here goes (I'll translate on the actual chapters as well):

Andaran atish'an: Enter this place in peace. A formal and traditional elvhen greeting
Ma ghilana mir din’an: Guide me into death.
Mana Ma halani: Help me.
Dirthara-ma da'len: May you learn, child. A common curse; a wish of misfortune upon someone

Comments give me life! I'd love to talk with you guys!

The table has been set. Family dinner. I wasn’t invited. I take my seat at the empty place, the head of the table.

I sit down at the table, my own family at my back while the one in front of me stares in horror. There’s a swirl of sense of rage and sadness turning inside; I need to do this. Need to kill them.

My seat. My place setting, next to Madame Turner.

A glance around revealed the faces of four sad people: a mother, a father, a daughter, and a son. The mother is at my left. There was a word for them that I am missing.

Simulacra. Will startled at being pushed out of the headspace. The word was true, that was what the wisp allowed him to see. The perpetrator of the murder of this family thought of them as simulacra or, more likely, an equivalent term, but they were not the kind of person that would understand any ancient Tevene or Arcanum apparently. He noted that down for later.

He gently rubbed his eyes and cautiously scanned the room. Jack wasn't back yet. The elf resettled in the seat and took in the room again, trying to get back. The herbs that he ate shouldn't have worn off yet, so he didn't need to eat more. That could put him to sleep longer or have another ill effect, something that he wasn't prepared for.

The room was brimming with stale air, the musk and mold enough to burn the lungs. Four people sat at a grand table, clearly meant for parties, slumped against it, most with crossbow bolts to the back of the skull. Executed for the crime of being a family. Their rotting heads filled their plates while the food decomposed beside them. Will closed his eyes and drifted off once more.

I am the guest of honor.

They are still there in front of me. Someone places a reassuring hand on my shoulder, allowing me some comfort. This was necessary. This was right.

They keep stock still, and I need to do something about it.

No one has taken a bite of the dinner, except for the youngest. I lean closer, predacious. "Unless you eat your growing foods, you won't get any dessert." The son hastily shoves a bite of food into his mouth, aware that it might be his last. No one at the table is bound, but they are too afraid to move. It was strange, seeing the younger children behave themselves so well. I would make such a great parent. The threats have been enough to keep them at bay, but the itchiness in the way that the father shuffled would mean that it wouldn't be for long. It was time to act.

My family arrives behind them, filling the void of the fakes. A crossbow bolt for all, but the mother, who dies last. I am the one who kills her, handed a crossbow for myself. It feels awkward in my hands, but it will do its job. I look her in the eyes, feeling a strange sort of comfort in the acceptance I see there. It takes effort, but I pull back the bolt and shoot it home.

He wakes. Jack is standing behind him.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"A very particular kind of family values."

"Whose?"

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Normally, it would not be in his nature to become so invested in an experiment, but the young elf mage had met all of his standards and then some. Hannibal found Will's mind exciting; it was malleable like no other, yet fastidious in its determination to hold shape. What he wouldn't give to have his hands running across it and through it; envy filled him. Spirits and demons traipsed around the brunette's head, but he had to remain outside it.

Luckily, the Seekers were dragging the elvhen man around the Dales, apparently chasing after the murderer of a family. He would be back soon, but he asked if there was a way for Hannibal to watch his small pack; his friend, Beverly, would be running around with him and Alana had her hands full with Abigail. Honestly, Hannibal knew she wasn't that busy and there was no way that she would refuse his help. It seemed that the young man was nervous around the Sister and did not like asking her for things. The reluctance did not bother Hannibal in the slightest. It was no trouble, really, but he would not be asking a servant to bring them to the house. He would lose the opportunity to observe Will's home.

As he approached the small shack, the older man brought his own offering to the Mabari pack. It would be best if they respected him and were fond of him. Any sort of intimidation that he might attempt was very likely to backfire, so treading cautiously was the best option. The fact that the hounds would be eating sausage he made with special ingredients was an added bonus.

The Mabari were barking at the door and he nudged it open, before the barreled out at him. Holding out his offering, Hannibal tossed it into the gaping mouths and threw some in the greenery surrounding the property so that he could get some privacy in the home. They played outside, rummaging in the grass and frolicking around each other, so he was confident that he would have some time before he needed to bring them in.

The shack was tidy in the way that the artists that he had met were tidy. It was organized chaos. It may look cluttered at first glance, but there was a pattern that only the most trained eye could see. Everything there was a mixed bag of items for cooking, clothing, and various tools. It was the epitome of a lifestyle meant to pick up and leave at any moment. Despite this, there was a small locked box near the bedroll. Hannibal picked his way through the multitude of blankets where the dogs clearly slept to it.

The box itself was more like a case. It was elongated, barely able to fit in a pack, and clearly locked. Luckily, Hannibal was always prepared for such things. He pulled a few of the items he kept on hand from his lockpicking set and went to work. The hounds outside and bayed at the door. It wouldn't be long before he would have to stop.

A few clicks and it was open. The case was lined with some form of soft leather, possibly Halla? It seemed unlikely though, the Dalish revered the beasts. Inside was a well-crafted bow, beyond any human craftsman that he had ever seen. It was clearly made of wood, but stronger and studier than the material usually was. There were also several arrows, recently fletched. Will himself must be a crafter. They had small beads and trinkets attached to the ends, more for form than function.

A piece of home.

Hannibal smiled and pricked a careful finger on the tip of an arrowhead, before he set to work. He only had a few minutes left, so he needed to make the most of it, after all.

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Another morning in this place. The Chantry was beginning to grate on her nerves, more so than it did before anyway. It was the same routine everyday. The Sisters and Mothers began the day with morning prayer before preparing to take care of the people in the village seeking help. They cared for the sanctuary and for the garden before having lunch and then mid-day prayer. Then there was singing and chanting as they prayed for the evening. The last meal of the day was served just before a prayer before bed.

There was a lot of praying.

Her parents were Andrastian to be sure, but not particularly religious. They would come to the Chantry once a week and on festival days to celebrate the Chants or on other holidays, particularly Summerday and Satinalia. Abigail occasionally would go with her mother on All Souls' Day, but her father refused every time. He thought it was too morbid, having a holiday to celebrate the spirits of the dead, but her mother used the time to appreciate their family and the death of revered Andraste. It occurred to her that Satinalia would be happening soon, as the month of Harvestmere drew to a close and winter approached. She wouldn't be going with them this time.

Today, she was going to try and do something useful. She was tired of hiding in her room, avoiding the Sisters and Brothers. It had been easier to stay away, but if she stayed there much longer, she might actually go crazy. Abigail dressed plainly and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her dress skimmed mid-calf and the hem dragged against her boots. It was a 'peasant dress'. That was what she heard nobles occasionally call the ensemble, tittering behind their fans. It was fairly conservative, but still dipped to low for her liking; it didn't cover her neck.

It took a while, but eventually she managed to find something with a higher collar. It climbed up her neck to cover it completely from prying eyes. Admittedly, it was the highest she had ever worn and felt like it was strangling her, but it was a small price to pay for her dignity and privacy.

After dressing, she managed to leave the room and gradually make her way down the hall to the kitchens. It was there that she saw Sister Bloom. The woman was carrying a tray laden with food, a meal for two. She looked startled, yet pleased.

"Abigail," she sighed, a large smile growing on her face. "I'm so glad to see you. I was bringing you breakfast so that we could talk, but perhaps we could take it in the courtyard?"

It was a reasonable request, so she found none to deny the sister. It would do her some good to get fresh air, so she nodded. They walked in silence to the garden and sat on a bench. Alana passed her the fresh bread and cheese. There were a few veggies and a thin soup as well, but the Sister was waiting to hand them over. The food at the Chantry was always cooked simply and lightly, not how she had originally expected. With the way she had seen

some of the Mothers from other parts of Orlais behave, she thought there would be feasts everyday, but this was a small Chantry. Maybe they just enjoyed living simply.

They ate quietly for a few moments before Alana finally gave her the rest of the food. It dawned on Abigail that she had been waiting to see if she was going to eat at all, which was strange. A few more moments, and Alana finally spoke. “The weather is fairly nice today. Winter is fast approaching, but it seems that the days remain mild.”

Abigail sighed. “It is mild, isn’t it?” Alana did not comment further. It only served to irritate her. “I feel more comfortable hiding the scar; it was like I was advertising what happened to me. The dress may be out of season, but it makes me feel safe. Now, no one notices.”

“Hiding defeats the purpose of being here, Abigail. If you are ever going to do ordinary things again, you need to accept that it is a part of you. Make it normal.”

She scoffed. “I’m not normal. Not anymore.” Not that she really needed to say it. Sister Alana knew; she just didn’t want Abigail to act like it was.

“What happened to you isn’t normal,” was her only response.

Abigail growled back, “I hate how they all stare at me.” Her voice began to rise, “They look at me and…” She trailed off. Pinprick tears were gathering beneath her lids while she wavered. If only she hadn’t agreed to eat in the courtyard. A few people milling about began to stop, but Alana shooed them along.

After she gathered herself, she tried to continue. “They look at me and they know what happened. All of it. I can’t hide from that, but hiding the scar lets them forget. The other wards… they act like children. They talk about what was done to them and their pain and it hurts. It makes me angry. I can’t stand to be near them.”

Alana warily reached out with her hand. Abigail saw it coming and let it draw near without protesting. It cautiously rested on the high portion of her back and began to soothe. The tension she had been holding in her shoulders melted and pooled on the ground, weighing her with the force of gravity.

“It’s different for everyone, Abigail. We need to try everything we can to help you, and sometimes that means sharing.”

Abigail glared at the grass beneath them. The soothing continued and it helped dampen any rage, but that didn’t stop it. She wanted to be somewhere else. She wanted to be home.

“I hate it here. I went into the sanctuary once and someone asked me if I kept my stained clothes. Why the fuck would someone ask that?”

She thought for a moment that cursing would upset the Sister, but it didn’t. She didn’t know how to feel about that. What else she said clearly did though. “I’m sorry someone said that to you. Your particular story is very lucrative right now; you can blame the Red Tattler for that. Ugh. Bards.”

“Bards?” Sister Alana shook her head.

“They go on about only being instruments of the Grand Game and not favoring any players, but that’s just an excuse to stir trouble without consequences.”

Abigail swore that Alana was about to curse too, but refrained from saying anything. She just smiled, holding back laughter at the indignation she could see on the woman’s face. They resumed eating, and Alana asked, “Could you give speaking with someone another try?”

Abigail frowned. “Can’t I just talk to you?”

“You can, but I’d prefer for it to be someone else as well. That way you have two people to go to instead of one.”

Abigail also refrained from mentioning that she already had another person in Comte Lecter. It didn’t seem like the appropriate time. That would also require explaining how she got to that point in the first place, and they didn’t have a lie prepared.

“I just don’t want you to isolate yourself.”

She sighed, “I won’t.”

Every line on Alana’s face simultaneously relaxed. “Thank you.”

“When is Will getting back?” And they all tensed again.

“I’m not sure actually. Why do you ask?”

She shrugged. “It was my mom’s birthday yesterday. We were going to go into the forest and hike to the base of the Frostbacks. It would have taken a whole week, but it was usually worth it. I thought, maybe, that Will could come with me and we could scatter my mom’s ashes.”

Alana studied her face before nodding, pleased. “When he gets back, we can ask him. Perhaps we can make it a holiday for us all. A chance to get away and give her rest before All Souls’ Day.”

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With everything going on, between the chaos with the murderer taking Will away and her new charge, Alana knew that she had been neglecting her friend. Comte Lecter, Hannibal, had been the one to show her the delights of simple living and encouraged her when she decided that the Game was too much for her. Her whole extended family had been… displeased when she decided to join the Chantry, but she had never been happier.

There was something to be said for a life in service to the Maker. Devotion could be a beautiful and freeing thing.

She had not been adequately compensating for her gratitude. Well, she called it gratitude, but that would be a gross simplification for what she felt for him. He was her friend and, once

upon a time, a mentor and confidant. Alana was well aware that he required no compensation, but she often phrased it as such. It was their little joke.

“Hello,” she greeted with a simple smile as he arrived in the parlor. Nesiraya had been happy to show her in, and had quickly notified his Lordship that she was visiting.

“And why might the Chantry be knocking?” replied Hannibal, smirking at her from the doorway.

“Might it be that I am finally repaying my debts?” He laughed.

“There’s really no need, Alana.”

“Then do you have an ale?” He finally entered the room as Nesiraya gently maneuvered past him. She was carrying a thin fluted glass and a thick mug. The mug was passed over to her and she drank heartily, it was sweeter than she expected. Hannibal sipped from his own drink delicately. He held the glass like he held himself, simultaneously complete still and yet gracefully relaxed. It had taken her a long time to get used to it; the posture reminded her far too much of an animal posed to strike.

“I’m assuming that it must have been an interesting day with Abigail.”

“You would be assuming correctly,” Alana replied. She tried to think of the best way to say this. “She’s lost. There is so much that she no longer has, and it's getting to her.”

“No longer has?”

“A chance to be normal. A chance to grow up with both of her parents. She seems so sad lately, and there’s not much that I can do to help her.”

“She?” he asked and Alana smiled gently.

“I don’t usually drink Hannibal, but there’s nothing wrong with a little self-medication now and then.” She sighed and continued the thought, “It’s hard to see such a bright girl with so much potential go so adrift.” He nodded and motioned for them to sit.

It was the parlor, so the layout was much more open than the study. Admittedly, Alana loved his study, but at the moment she needed the gleaming marble to reflect the sunlight from the open balcony windows. The view of the distant Emerald Graves and the Frostback Mountains was amazing.

She sat down on the chaise lounge, the darker tones of the chair standing out starkly against the lighter walls and floor. That tended to be how Hannibal decorated, contrasting dark and light. She found it part of his charm and his upbringing in Nevarra and Antiva showing through; most nobles simply found him eccentric and left it at that. She took off her shoes and tucked her feet up beside her, much to Hannibal’s amusement. He enjoyed her peculiarities, much to the frustration of every single noble in Val Royeaux. He joined her in his relaxation, not going so far as to take off his shoes, but his own equivalent thereof.

“You said that she has been sad lately, and it is increasing. It must be easy to lose perspective while hiding away in a Chantry for weeks.” What he said was true, Alana knew this. She worried though, not that the girl couldn’t handle herself, but that she would have to face the angry hoard of people that would blame her for her father’s crimes. “Perhaps she should be released?”

“Where?” she countered. “Back into the wild? The tender mercies of the people her father wronged? I think not.”

He frowned. “I doubt that spending each day in the Chantry is doing that much good. Either she is coddled or has the tragedy pushed in her face. Wouldn’t it be better to allow her to find her own way in the world? Maybe she wishes to leave Red Crossing and the surrounding area.”

“She is in no condition to be by herself right now, let alone travel! Besides, I highly doubt that the Seekers would let her get too far, especially if it meant that Will would follow right after her.”

“Will?”

Alana deflated and rubbed her hand on the lounge, trying to come up with the best way to say this. “He visited her room nearly every day that she was in a coma and has been making subtle visits to her when he can. He feels responsible for her, culpable for her situation.”

“So she has another champion in her life?”

“I don’t know if that’s the wisest. Will tries his best, but he needs to come to some conclusions of his own before he is responsible for another person’s life. What has he told you about his Clan?”

Tilting his head slightly, Hannibal seemed to make himself more comfortable on the lounge. “Not anything really. What is it?”

She shook her head. “If he hasn’t told you, then neither will I. It’s not my place.” Her mug was finished and she looked to Hannibal for a moment, before placing it where he gestured to. She knew the conversation was coming to a close and began putting back on her boots. “Hannibal, you are a dear friend, but it doesn’t change the fact that Abigail has been through much.”

“I know. I was there.” Not helpful, Hannibal.

“I can’t tell you what to do, and I don’t want to. You have done much for me and I’m sure you want to help Abigail in the same way. Please understand that if you choose to take a personal interest in her life and welfare, then you can no longer walk away.” She stood up and waited for Hannibal to join her. “No matter what the outcome, you are in it for the long haul.”

He smiled. “We break it, we buy it?”

“Something like that.” Hannibal gently took her arm and walked her to the door. “Abigail was very attached to her parents. Overly so. This was a young girl that should have been getting an apprenticeship or involved with young people her age. She is at an age where most people start getting ready for the rest of their lives. You stepping in as a surrogate parent would only be a crutch.” They stopped at the door of the parlor, where Alana saw that Nesiraya was waiting. “She needs to work things out for herself and begin taking the next step in her journey, and she needs to do it somewhere safe.

He bowed his head. “I defer to the passion of the one that knows her better than I.”

“Thank you, Hannibal.” They kissed cheeks and then Nesiraya led her out. It had been a productive conversation, and, as she was led out into the open air and made her way to Red Crossing, it was nice to see an old friend again.

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The city guard barracks in Val Henar were far more qualified to handle the work done by the Seekers than that in Red Crossing. The space was larger, thanks to the village being more of a town, and the greater number of Templars meant that they had more respect. Sort of. Will noticed that it was less that people actually admired them and more that they knew the trouble that would come from crossing the Seekers of Truth.

It wasn’t as encouraging as it probably should have been. At least none of the guards or Templars did more than look at him twice.

They were not in the office this time, but instead a ‘chill room’. The bodies were laid out on tables that were magically enchanted to remain cold, not that it was necessary. He put another preservation glyph on the bodies and they were fine. All it did was make the room freezing cold much to the frustration of both Beverly and Will, considering that they were in light armor. Even Brian looked like he was beginning to regret his leathers and he wore a light robe over the whole thing.

Jack and James looked perfectly fine. Will hated them a little for it.

“The victims were Karen and Roger Turner. They grew up here; everyone knew that they were going to raise a family together,” Jack turned slightly to the side to explain to Will. “Childhood sweethearts.” He could have guessed, thank you. “They were pillars of the community. They ran a general goods store and she often headed meetings for the mothers and wives of the neighborhood. Three children.”

“We’re missing one,” commented Will.

Jack nodded. “Their other child, Jesse, disappeared last year. They went out to spend some time with the neighbors and returned home to find him gone. The other children had been about town and said they saw no sign of him. It could be that he simply left or that someone took him; we have no way of knowing right now.”

It seemed extreme, but possible. “What about both? They’re not mutually exclusive.” A child leaves home and gets taken by someone else. Water flitting from one creek to another, unable

to make its own. He could sympathize.

Beverly stepped up, “I’ve been going through what everyone said around town. It’s been over a year since he went missing, so no one really has anything solid to give us.”

“Was there any sign that someone forced their way in?”

“That’s what’s strange,” she argued. “There was absolutely nothing. No broken windows, no signs of fighting, no destroyed locks. It’s like they invited them in.”

“Probably just knocked on the door,” muttered Jack. His eyes looked sad. Will tried to understand why beyond the obvious. There was something there, he could feel it pressing on his senses.

“Look here!” yelled Brian. He pointed to the body. “I thought this might have been odd, but it doesn’t seem so crazy now. The arrows look like they came from a point lower than normal. I thought maybe they were kneeling, because the angle was wrong for standing up, but if it was Jesse…” he trailed off. The weight of what he said punched through his gut.

“It could have been dwarves,” argued James.

Brian looked affronted. “You of all people? Jimmy, there aren’t many dwarves in this town.”

“Oh and just because there aren’t many dwarves here that means that they can’t have been the murderers!”

The two continued to bicker while Beverly grabbed his shoulders. “Let’s get something to eat. As entertaining as this is, our fearless leader has already left-” Jack had left; how had he not noticed. “- and I can only stand them for so long.”

The group gathered around a table in the dining hall. The food was plain, bland stew and bread. Not particularly appetizing, but they couldn’t afford to be picky at the moment. There was too much work to be done. Regardless of the taste, they were all digging in with gusto. It had taken a week to get there, and they had begun working immediately, no rest for the wicked. The hall was almost empty, because it was the middle of the night. Taking so long with their work meant that they got the place to themselves, but the guards that lived in the barracks were in their bunks nearby, so they couldn’t afford to be rowdy. That didn’t stop Brian and James though.

“I’m so glad we didn’t have crossbows in the Chantry. I would’ve shot one of the Sisters every day for trying to get me to my lessons. There was also this one kid that refused to leave the baths; he would stay there for hours.”

“No weapons in a Chantry?” Will asked softly.

“Nah. That’s what the Templars were for.”

Beverly shrugged. “I grew up in a big family. The Alienage cares for all of us kids anyhow, so it’s like I had actual siblings and then even more siblings. I liked having all of them… mostly.”

James chimed in between bites. “My parents gave me the best gift of all, a twin. Who wouldn’t want a second me?”

Brian laughed and pointed at Will, “Only child?”

“Why do you say that?”

He shrugged. “Family friction is a catalyst for personality development.”

Beverly tried to push the conversation on her rather than Will. “I was the oldest, so all of it went on everyone else.”

“Of course!” cried James. “ All of that lovely heaping of responsibility, attention, and expectation lead first borns to being a success in life… right?”

A cough. “Here I am,” drawled Beverly. “Living the dream.”

“I was sort of the oldest, if that counts,” Will added. The others paused. It was then that realized that, while he may have talked about it with Beverly, James and Brian had no clue about his life. He shrunk in his seat.

“How do you ‘sort of’ be the oldest?” asked Brian.

“Uh,” Will responded, trying to find a way to put it. He shoveled food in his mouth and collected his sparking and popping thoughts before continuing. “Mages kind of work differently among the Dalish and I was pretty much raised by the Keeper. I was her First, so I had to watch out for the Second and was usually left in charge of the other kids.”

“What’s a First?” asked James.

“Um.. the Keeper is the head mage and leader of a Dalish Clan. Their First is their direct apprentice and who is going to take over after they die. It’s a lot of responsibility.” He kept eating to avoid looking at them.

Jack burst into the hall. “All of the victims have defensive wounds except for Madame Turner.”

“What?” asked Beverly. The change in pace and Jack’s demeanor was jarring.

He stopped in front of their table. “I have been trying to figure out what was throwing me off. It appears that all of the victims fought back except for Madame Turner. Looks like you’ll have to wait a bit longer to get some sleep.” Several groans. Will was definitely one of them.

“What kind of person doesn’t fight back in a situation like that? We’re pretty sure that it was a bunch of kids so it wasn’t like there wasn’t a chance they could leave.”

“Ahem,” replied James.

“For the last time!” started Brian. “It probably isn’t dwarves!” The two began bickering again.

“If we think it’s children, there is a high chance that the reason there are no defensive wounds is because she forgave her killer.”

“Who does that?”

“A mother.”

Unfortunately, after that revelation the trail went cold. There is only so much that someone can do when there is no way to monitor where the child might have gone beyond a rough sketch shown to people in the nearby area. Without any solid information and no further incident, they left to return back to Red Crossing. Jack didn’t want to stray too far from potential perpetrator Abigail Hobbs and Comte Lecter, who was graciously checking up on Will for him.

When they arrived, Jack asked Will to check in with his Lordship, citing the need for someone to share trauma should a scene like the one they just witnessed arrive. “I’ve seen a lot of people pretend that that kind of thing didn’t bother them and pay the price. I expect you to do your job, but I also expect you to take care of yourself.”

Jack didn’t understand what it was that he did… not really. Will humored him anyway. The conversation with the Comte , however, could not have started worse.

“Tell me about your mother,” his Lordship began and it was downhill from there. Will scoffed and rolled his eyes.

“Tell me about yours”

“A rather resilient woman from what I remember. She died when I was still a child,” Comte Lecter didn’t even hesitate.

Will blinked, “I’m sorry.”

His Lordship waved it off, “It is no matter. I have long since come to terms with any grief. I regret not having her as part of my life more, but that is hardly my fault.”

Will paused, trying to think of a way to respond. “I- I didn’t know my mother. She fell ill shortly after I was born and died.”

“Both of my parents died around the same time,” Lecter replied. “I stayed away from scrutiny for a while before I was found and taken in by my Uncle Robertas and his wife Lady Mundari.”

“Mundari?” Will rolled the word around in his mouth. “That doesn’t sound Nevarran.”

Lecter nodded. “She was a lady from Rivain - a Seer in fact. Luckily, both Rivain and Nevarra, to some degree, are more lax on mages than most any other place. That is excluding the Tevinter Imperium of course. It was she that first taught me to accept and appreciate magic, not to fear it.”

“That explains your rather casual attitude around me,” Will pointed out.

“Or I am simply comfortable around you.”

The silence rang out and the two waited for it to break. “I suppose you can, to some degree, sympathize with Abigail.”

“You and I have a great deal in common with her.”

Will turned away. “I’ll admit that I wish I could be better for her. I saved her life and orphaned her, but to serve as her family… it feels wrong. Like armor just the slightest bit too big or small. The Dalish as a whole raised me to some extent, but it never felt like more than my People. I had a responsibility to them, but no deep connection.”

A cocked head, then: “You claim to have no concept of family, yet you made one for yourself.”

Will snorted. “I gathered a pack of strays. Thanks for arranging care for them while I was gone.”

He smiled and nodded his head. “Of course, but -” now his Lordship looked slightly pained. “I was referring to young Abigail. Regardless, I have been informed that we have something we simply must speak about.” Comte Lecter twitched one eyebrow playfully. “Tell me about the Turner family.”

“They were well-to-do,” he began. “Messere Turner was apparently a merchant, living with enough money to easily care for his family and buy luxuries, but not enough to be a meaningful player in the Game.”

“Is it an odd concept for you?”

“That kind of living? I suppose so. The Dalish migrate around a lot, we don’t usually stay in one place for more than a season or two, though we do return to certain sites. We also live off of what we’ve got; there isn’t any room for extravagance.” Will sighed, trying to keep from feeling resentment or frustration. He didn’t know at whom it was directed. “Seeing people spend money on things they don’t use or don’t need irritates me. It feels wasteful.”

Comte Lecter remained quiet and that’s when Will abruptly remembered where he was. “My apologies, I didn’t mean to insult you.”

A quiet, almost imperceptible smile, “There’s no need to worry. I wasn’t bothered.”

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Seeker of Truth Jack Crawford was concerned. He worried that Will wouldn't be able to handle the stress of the work that he did, and it bothered him. The unfortunate fact was that he needed Will and knew that he needed to keep him. Whether or not it would be under guard was the real question. If Will tried to renege on their deal, it wouldn't be his ire that Will would have to deal with. Once Jack had caught wind of a rogue Dalish mage traveling the countryside, several Templar groups had already been baying for blood. He's lucky that Jack got there first.

There were a few things that he could do to keep Will from being locked up in a Circle, killed, or put through the Rite of Tranquility, and if he could do them, Jack would. A sponsor would endear him to the Grand Game of Orlais, especially one with enough inoffensiveness, eccentricness, and clout as Comte Hannibal Lecter. This put Will as Comte Lecter's strange pet project in the eyes of the nobility and kept Templars from going after him, for fear of upsetting the wrong noble. The Chantry and Templar Order had a lot of power in Orlais, but even they did not wish to upset the Empress, who was especially fond of Lecter.

Jack may have been from Rivain, but, upon arriving in Orlais, he learned to play the Game and play it well.

It was in his best interest to keep up a good relationship with Comte Lecter, 'less the man have the usual attention span of a noble and suddenly decide that he was bored. Then, they would all be in trouble. Lady Seeker Kade Prurnell was not a forgiving woman. As far as things that he's done to appease nobles, this was the most pleasant experience by far; the man knew how to cook.

"A modified recipe from my homeland. Spiced pears with Rivaini rum risotto. It is typically accompanied by roasted lamb, but I decided to try something a little different."

"Oh? What kind of meat then?"

"Rabbit."

Jack snorted, "He should have hopped faster."

"Yes, he should have."

They settled in and Jack partook. The spiced pears melded with the meat and risotto extremely well, easily consumed thanks to the flatbread that held the ingredients together. He was surprised at the sweet spice; it reminded him of home.

"You make me wish there was seafood to go along with this. It's been so long since I was at the coast."

"Comfort from home. I also find the same in food. Speaking of... How is your wife?"

"Busy," he commented. "She was in Starkhaven when the Circle burned down and the ruling family was assassinated last year. I received a missive from her a few months ago that she was on her way back though, so it should be nice to see her again. Bella should be here any day now."

“You must promise to deliver her to my dinner table,” responded Comte Lecter and Jack smiled.

“With food like this? I wouldn’t dare let her miss it.”

They continued feasting, the silence broken by the hearty enjoyment of food. One of the elven servants watched carefully, occasionally refilling their glasses with sweet wine, also from Nevarra. Jack recognized her as Nesiraya, the one Hannibal called discreet. He could speak more freely then.

“Will seemed distraught today. The nature of the murder got to him more than usual, although that is to be expected for all of my crew. A murder of an entire family. It’s disheartening to see what people can do to each other.” He took another bite and savored the meal, bit by bit. It never would cease to amaze him that a noble could take care of a meal like this, let alone allow others to know about their hobby.

Hannibal took a hearty bite as well before eyeing Jack past his utensils. “I doubt that the age and relationships of the victims will affect Will’s professionalism.”

Admittedly, Jack felt suitably chastised. He was pushing for Will to be given special treatment over the actual Seekers in his squad. He justified it by reminding himself that Will was a mage and would need more attention, lest the worst happen. Still, that didn’t excuse him for not checking on his team. “What would bother him, then?”

Comte Lecter shook his head. “I don’t know anymore about what lies beneath his pillow than you do.”

He paused. Jack understood why Will might not share his dreams. The Realm of Dreams was dangerous for any mage and the temptation of demons often a source of shame for those that he had come across. No one likes to be reminded that the person next to you could become a monster at any moment, should they just be a little too weak, a little too pliable. Mages didn’t like to remind anyone either.

“I wonder if you should. That’s where he’ll need the most protection.”

Comte Lecter did what must count as a smile or a snort. It was hard to tell; the man’s face was impassive. “I doubt I would be able to Seeker Crawford. Forming these bonds with killers takes him to places where he is more vulnerable than I can possibly reach. I will do what I can for him here.”

“Bonds with killers?” Jack thought aloud. Internally, he supposed it was better simply killers than demons, if such a thing could be called simple. Of course, if what Jack believed was correct, there may be one bond that was less than metaphorical. “Bonding with children killing children; it is not exactly untreated territory for Will.”

“You still suspect Abigail?” Jack couldn’t decide whether the Comte's voice was neutral or hurt. It barely managed to ride the line between statement and accusation.

He shrugged, attempting to play it off, lest he seriously offend the man. “I suspect most people. As far as the law is concerned, she had nothing to do with it.”

His host tilted his head. “Yet Seekers of Truth operate above the law and beyond it.”

“It wouldn’t do to punish a young girl for a crime that can’t be proven. The public is already tipping wildly on either side. We manage it by keeping her under observation instead of freeing her, and letting her live instead of killing her. This whole business has become very notable, especially to Game players.” A thoughtful head tilt of his own towards the table spelled it out: *We know what that means.* The last thing the Seekers needed was any bad attention from the nobles. Lady Seeker Prurnell was already at his throat for something that hadn’t even happened yet.

“And how does this concern Will?”

“He may have been wrong about her, that’s all. The whole situation is stressful and spirits are known to be malleable. Maybe he’s been given incorrect information? Maybe he hasn’t and he just doesn’t want to see it?”

There was a comfortable pause at the table that felt like it shouldn’t be. The strange disconnect between the emotion present and the anticipation of another.

“Perhaps it is something less than what you believe it to be?” his Lordship broke through. “I have been suitably informed that Seekers are wary of everything.”

Jack laughed, “You mean paranoid.”

“Only a little,” jested the man in front of him.

“And what do you think?”

There was a gathering of thoughts and words visible in front of him; the man was attempting to find the correct words to convey his thoughts (or making a show of the attempt). “This business with children might have Will thinking of his home and upbringing among the Dalish. You mentioned in passing that he talked about being the one responsible for the others in the village. Perhaps he feels responsible for these as well.”

That was something to think about.

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“So,” James began, giving Will his rapt attention. “What was it like moving from one culture to another?”

Will glanced up from where he had been carefully reading another spell book. His recent focus on Creation magic had brought him back to the spirits, and he was trying to decide on a few spells to pay better attention to. “What was it like to live with a dwarven father and a human mother?” he asked back. James appeared shocked at first, before shrugging and smiling it off.

James leaned back on the dining hall bench, carefully shuffling around the notes about the scenes that they had been studying. Seeker Crawford had more or less resigned them all to waiting for another scene to pop up, so the four of them had decided to take a moment to eat. Jack wasn't with them, apparently taking dinner elsewhere. Will admitted to himself that the reason he didn't just walk home and eat with his dogs was the knowledge that he needed to ingratiate himself to these people. If they liked him, they would be less likely to drag him off to a Circle… or make him Tranquil.

Once he was done organizing the notes he had taken, James sat them down on the table. The man was only slightly portly, but made up for the stomach with stocky arms and legs that could have been intimidating, if it weren't for his goofy smile. "There was a lot of arguing and a lot of cursing. My father was positive that my mother was more dwarf than he was, considering how well she took to the family business and tradition. My dad was born a surfacer, so most of the culture was second hand or merged with that of the nearby humans." He tapped his nose. "There was none of that 'Stone' stuff. Parents were both hardline Andrastians. When my brother and I were born, they knew one of us would get the business and the other would go to the Chantry." A shrug. "I guess I was the unlucky one."

"Hey!" shouted Brian. "Some of us are happy to be here." Beverly rolled her eyes as she sat down next to Will. She playfully bumped his shoulder with hers before putting in her own input. "I was the one that would go back and forth between the Alienage and the other districts, so I had to get used to humans quick. Nobody really looked at me twice until I started speaking, had to learn to drop terminology that would give me those second glances. Helped me get lower priced food and goods from some of the more ignorant merchants."

Brian came over with a steaming pot of food, some sort of stew, and a few bowls. While he poured the potage into them, he spoke, "Grew up in the Chantry. Mom was a scullery maid and dad was a chevalier, so neither of them wanted me. Never really knew anything else, which made it weird when I finally went into Seeker training."

Beverly leaned forward, "How did you end up a Seeker again? I know Jimmy went through the normal way, having started out as a Templar, and I was picked up by Crawford."

After finishing dividing up the food, Brian sat down with his own bowl and began to eat. "Started dabbling in alchemy and potion-making when the Brothers weren't looking. After blowing a few things up, causing a mass hallucination, and healing a few people, some were worried that I was a mage. When they found out it was just the potions that I was creating, a Seeker thought that was useful and took me under their wing," he said around the bites he was taking.

They lapsed into a comfortable bit of silence with the exception of the sounds of eating. Will realized that this was where he was supposed to contribute to the conversation, but no one was trying to pressure him. With a sigh, he joined, both in eating and speaking, "I left the Dalish more or less voluntarily and a few months after ended up living with the Avvar."

James' eyes grew wide, and he dropped his spoon in the bowl. It made a bit of a mess on the table. "You lived with the Avvar?" he half-asked, half-yelled.

“For a time, yes,” Will replied once he removed his hands from his ears. “I actually learned quite a bit of the way that they conduct magic, it’s why I’m so comfortable around spirits.”

Beverly tilted her head to the side, “How? And the Dalish weren’t?”

“The Clan I lived in treated spirits and demons the same. They were both something to be wary of and largely were forbidden. They weren’t very pleased when I showed an aptitude for Spirit Magic.”

She bowed her head. “I’m sorry.”

He laughed, knowing exactly what type of feeling that story evoked when told in full. “Whatever for? They never treated me badly, just disapproved of my hobbies, like all parents.” The others laughed at the joke and continued on being merry. It was better that he never let them know the reason why he left. It didn’t shed a very good light on his people.

The next day, seven very pleased Mabari pranced around as Will continued foraging. Abigail walked closely behind him, listening as he examined each and every plant. “This is embrium,” Will told her. He held the sharp orange flower out to her.

“What does it do?” she asked, looking uncertain.

“It produces a fragrance that can open up the lungs and promote healthy breathing. It also has an oil that can be added to healing concoctions to make them inhalable rather than forcing them to be drunk.”

“Huh,” she said. They moved further into the forest, Will pointing out different plants and their properties. He had been visiting her earlier when she declared that the Chantry was stuffy and too confining. With permission granted by the Sisters (Alana was not there, thankfully), he was granted the ability to take him with her. It helped that Jack had given him a symbol of the Seekers of Truth that he could carry around and flash at others. Admittedly, part of the reason he had planned this outing was to ask if she wished to spend time with him on the Andrastian holiday Satinalia, it was fast approaching. He simply hadn’t had the courage or the strength to do so. It was an important holiday for humans, and he wanted to be there to help her through it.

“Thanks for doing this,” she added. “My dad just told me to grab what looked important and would sort them out himself. I used to think that he just didn’t have the patience, but I wonder if he was just trying to keep me a bit more dependent on him.”

Will carefully stepped over a bunch of knotted roots protruding from the ground. “It is very possible.” He quickly moved to help her navigate through the bramble, but she was managing just fine on her own. The man smiled; it was nice to see Abigail holding her own after the last couple of weeks.

The two of them trekked further, Will giving Abigail different advice on the use of the herb. This advice did include some old Dalish uses for them, mostly tea. It was as he was mentioning his Clan that Abigail decided to chime in. Of course it was on a subject that Will consistently dreaded.

“You’re Dalish right? You have those face tattoos, so I thought as much.”

He nodded, not particularly happy with the area that the conversation was entering. There were a lot of questions he didn’t feel comfortable even addressing in the privacy of his own mind, let alone discussing them with anyone else. It was also occasionally irritating to explain the Dalish to someone with little to no context.

“The tattoos… why do you have them?”

He paused, trying to think about how he could explain it. “They are called Vallaslin, that means blood writing. When the Keeper believes we are ready to become adults, you help choose the markings usually based on which god they represent and then what looks appealing.” He pushed a few weeds aside to pick up some Crystal Grace before continuing. The blue bell-like flowers and their magenta styles attracting the eye and misdirecting the wary. He explained to Abigail the healing properties of the flowers while trying to think of what to say next.

He hadn’t really had to explain this in full detail to anyone yet, and he hadn’t wanted the first person to find out anything substantial to be Abigail. We don’t always get what we want. But she asked, so he would answer. “The Keeper usually chooses when a person receives them. Um, it’s called blood writing, because a little of our own is spilled into the ink.”

“Wow!” she exclaimed. “So who are your tattoos for?”

He thought for a moment. “We aren’t really supposed to say, at least my Clan didn’t like us speaking about it to humans.”

She grouched slightly behind him, which made Will smile. She was still a girl by his Clan’s standards and this reminded him of her youth. Abigail existed in the in-between for him, both a young woman and a girl; independent and needing of his protection and guidance. What harm would telling her do? He wasn’t a part of his Clan any longer anyway. “Dirthamen,” he answered. “My vallaslin is for Dirthamen.”

“I’ve heard that name before!” He started. She had?

When he turned to her, the young woman looked rather embarrassed. “I asked Alana for some books of Dalish tales. He’s the god of secrets, right? The one with the twin.”

Will nodded and expanded for her, “He’s the Keeper of Secrets and Knowledge and he does have a twin brother. His name is Falon’din and-”

She interrupted him, “He’s the god of death and fortune.” They lapsed into silence. “Would I be able to get some tattoos?” she asked quietly and he sighed.

“I don’t think I can give them to you.” They started to return back to his home, Will subtly moving the path gradually turning back. Neither of them spoke. Neither of them wanted to. Will knew that Abigail shouldn’t want vallaslin, and that she couldn’t have it. It was a tradition of his People to show that they were still respecting the old ways and their history; giving them to a human was out of the question. Part of him wanted to though. He wanted to

welcome her into the fold, give her a home and a life. He wanted to watch her become an adult and guide her down that path.

Will knew he shouldn't though. Perhaps he should listen to Alana instead.

They arrived back at the cabin as it was nearing the beginning of evening. The sky was growing greyish-blue and the Mabari had tired themselves out. A couple of them were still frolicking, but the rest roamed around the duo in lazy circles, drifting to and fro between them and the forest. The woods seemed unnaturally dark as the sky dimmed, the tall trees blocking out the sun and casting deep shadows. In front of the house, standing tall like a tree himself, was Seeker Jack Crawford, and he did not look happy. He was flanked by Alana Bloom.

"Are you two done with your little outing?" the man asked gruffly, gesturing for Alana to take a hold of Abigail's hand. Before Will could even begin to argue, Jack said, "No, you're done." Alana looked at him apologetically and Abigail waved bye as they ventured back to the road leading to Red Crossing.

"And what might be for the occasion?" Will snarked.

"We've had a spotting of Jesse Turner. He was with another boy that someone local recognized; his name was Connor Frist."

"Another missing boy?"

Jack gestured for Will to follow him and began his own trek out of the woods before continuing, "Disappeared ten months ago. His family has been looking for him steadily ever since."

Will winced every time Jack hit a tree branch under foot as they walked, his heavy armor clanking together and surely disturbing the animals. Another boy, another family. He hoped that they wouldn't walk in on the worst. "Good news Madame and Messere Frist, your son is alive."

Jack smiled slightly, sadly. "Bad news, he's a suspect in four murders. Well, four so far."

Will sighed. "How many?"

Jack knew what he meant. "There are three, just like with the Turners."

The nausea and dread rose suddenly and without mercy. "Creators preserve us." This got an eyeful from Jack. Sometimes Will forgot that the Seekers of Truth was a religious organization. Maybe less of invoking the Creators around its members; that seems like a good idea.

"We're ready to go when you are, and, as far as I can see, you're ready to go now."

Will furrowed his brows. "We're ready already?"

“I got the team prepped before coming to get you. We’ve got a few horses and rations for several days, I’ve even asked Comte Lecter to watch your hounds for you again.”

It dawned on Will. “You’re expecting a crime scene.”

They rode hard and without stopping for much rest. They had only slowed down to allow individual members of their group to sleep in shifts while they continued on through the night. The horses were exhausted by the end of it, but they needed to try and beat the boys there. A few days later, when they managed to make it to Val Falaise, they immediately rushed to the Frist house. All of them were expected to be ready for battle, and the adrenaline was spiking so much that, despite the fact that they had little sleep, they felt awake and alive. The Frist home itself was exactly like the Turners, well off, but not too much. They were a merchant family perhaps aspiring to power, but still under the radar.

They wouldn’t be staying under the radar anymore, but that wasn’t because they managed to get that power.

Inside, there was a scattering of food and gifts, The family were laid on the floor, still in their masks and finery. Firstfall didn’t start for another couple of days, but it appeared that they family had already begun celebrating.

“Happy Satinalia,” Will muttered under his breath. A dog was wandering across the room into the arms of a young guardsmen that was whispering in hushed tones.

“At least the dog didn’t starve,” Beverly muttered back. Will could see scavenging marks of a canine in the food and on the bodies. At least the dog didn’t starve.

All of the family was scattered about what might have been a lounging room, somewhere warm with a fire and the luxury of not sharing a space with the kitchen or dining area. Now it was just a mess. The fire itself appears to have burned down, apparently done with the body that was also inside of it. Seeker Crawford, Jack, quietly entered the room, looking as downcast as Will felt. “We were too late.”

“Jack, these bodies weren’t killed very long ago. We found evidence that they stayed a little bit after in the last house, so they might still be here,” Jimmy said, hoping to bring about something good.

“They already checked, Jimmy. No one was here before we got into the house and nothing got out.”

“Then,” Brian added. “Then something must have gone wrong.”

Jack nodded as he glanced around the room. “The corpse in the fireplace?”

That nausea was back. He had been feeling it the entire trip over, but it returned with a vengeance. Everybody in the main room was accounted for; there was only one person that it could be. “I believe that would be Connor Frist.”

Beverly rose from the body that she had moved to examine. “Two bolts this time, both low to high. She didn’t die from the first one, but the angle as well as entry and exit points would have caused some serious damage.”

“She would have been suffering and he went into a panic,” Will extrapolated, trying to hold back tears. Another senseless bunch of deaths and this time a child disowned and forgotten. “He hadn’t been ready to watch her die a long death, only a quick one.”

Beverly spent a minute rummaging around the body of Madame Frist before jerking back with all of her strength. In her hand was a large bolt, brown from dried blood. “This bolt is pretty heavy. I don’t think a child could have wielded it. It’s lodged in a place that would have killed her quickly, so probably a second person.”

Jack joined Beverly by the body to see what she was describing. “Two crossbows, one light and one heavy, so there are two different killers. One probably is an adult or a teenager. They would have to be.”

Brian called from the fireplace. “The second person shot Connor too.”

“He couldn’t pull himself together and became too much of a liability. There are people around these homes, they can’t afford to make too much noise,” said Jack.

Will closed his eyes and tried to drift off while they were speaking. There were a few spirits here that called for his attention. There were a few demons as well. One of them was rage.

“In anger. The heavy crossbow wasn’t used at the Turners, because everything went the way it was supposed to.”

Brian sighed, “There’s a pillow under his head. Goose down, very expensive.”

Jack began shuffling back towards the door, motioning for the guards to finish the scene and for the team to accompany him out of the room. As he did, he spoke, “Connor Frist can’t finish off his mother and panics, so he is murdered. However, after he’s treated with compassion and given a make-shift Andrastian funeral.” Beverly grimaced at the ashes. “This is starting to get even more complicated; let’s get back to base, there’s nothing left for us here.”

They had only just arrived back in the village. It had taken longer to get back than there, as the Frists lived a week away, but the anger inside never really had a chance to die down, it simply boiled. No one wanted to talk on the ride back, but if conversation was had it was about the family’s murder. The first thing that Will did was find the nearest general store and buy fletching gear. The shopkeep had been ready to close up, but agreed to allow him this purchase. The owner watched him warily, not wanting this young elf to begin smashing his stock, but said elf was too pent up to feel insulted. Will was all the way back to his house with his wrapped package before remembering the disastrous attempt that teaching herbs was and proceeded to go to the only person’s advice he could seek. It was easy to blow past the

guards and servants on the Lecter estate and barrel for his study. No one even tried to stop him. Behind him, servants began running for the upstairs, presumably gathering their Lord.

He knocked impatiently on the intricately carved door when he reached it and fidgeted angrily outside of the door. A moment later and it opened to a placid Hannibal Lecter.

“Good evening, Will. Come in, please.” As Will rushed in, bumping him in the process, the noble noticed the package wrapped and tied tightly in Will’s arms. “Is it someone’s birthday?”

He tossed it on a small lounge, trying to be as dismissive as possible. It only sort of worked. “It was for Abigail,” he admitted and then immediately wished that he hadn’t said anything. Last time they had spoken, Will was so busy rejecting the concept of family, that he hadn’t realized how much he craved one. Ever since the Frist murder, it was all he could think about.

“Was?’ came the curious reply. It sounded genuine, which struck Will, but he wasn’t sure what it must have meant. He wasn’t used to someone actually being interested in his life beyond that of curiosity.

“I,” he cleared the stickiness from his throat. “I thought better of it. I wasn’t thinking clearly when I bought it.” He turned his head away from his conversation partner’s expression. “I was upset. I still am.”

His Lordship looked amused, which made his hackles flare up. “You buy gifts when you are angry?”

He scoffed. “Better gifts than teeth,” Will stated, agitation pulling up on his frame.

Comte Lecter gently picked up the ‘gift’ and maneuvered it in his hands. “I haven’t the faintest idea what it is.”

“Fletching gear. Herb pouches,” Will replied. He knew abstractly that his tone was short and abrasive, but at the moment his temper just kept flaring.

“Teaching her the Dalish way of the hunt and reacquainting her with the forest without her father’s influence.”

Will stopped and sighed. “That’s why I thought better of it. Abigail and I… we went into the woods before I left and I gradually became aware of why my association with her might be a bad idea. I’ve been craving guiding her, treating her like she’s a child. My child. But Abigail is almost an adult and her father left her in the dark. I’m not human; I can barely navigate in human society. She’s not an elf, I doubt she’d be welcome among the Clans.” He could feel tears trying to well up. “I can’t be the one to take care of her. I don’t have the right to.”

Comte Lecter sidled up behind him, Will was hyper aware of his movements in the room. Always was, always will be. “I feel it as well. I can’t exactly introduce her into high society, let alone Orlesian nobility. It’s dangerous for someone so young to be playing the Game without proper training. Most noble children here are groomed for it before they can walk.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “But you’re trying, aren’t you?”

“She can’t stay in the safety of the Chantry forever. I doubt being even a Lay Sister would feel satisfying for her. Abigail’s seen too much of the worst in the world to find peace in its gentle confinement.”

There was a pause as the unspoken hung in the air. It took a moment before it hit the ground. “Sister Bloom has advised me against interfering with Abigail for those very reasons I wish to remove her.”

Will turned to his Lordship and faced him. “She’s not wrong. Abigail needs a safe place to recover.”

“And what then?” was parried back. “Why were you so angry Will?”

“Those boys… They’ve given up so much.” He sat, slumping in the small lounge, defeated. “When I find them, I can’t help them. They gave away their sources of safety and peace, they destroyed them.”

“You gave away yours,” pointed out his sponsor.

“My circumstances were extreme and meant to help someone else,” Will replied.

Hannibal tilted his head. “You were thinking about Abigail and the home she lost. She needs your help, too. It is our responsibility to help her.”

Will snorted, “I doubt she needs mine.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. I’m planning a dinner with Abigail sometime in the near future; would you be willing to join?”

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Will had been staring with increasing intensity at the notes on the lives of the boys and their pictures. Beverly had noticed. It was as if something had taken hold of him and forced him to see them, over and over. She was visiting his little home again, wanting to check on him after his visit to the Comte. The half-elf also noticed that he always seemed drained after those visits, and had been taking it upon herself to check on him. The boys had been starting to notice it too, if not the exact circumstances of the cause. They had been talking lately about taking Will under their wing. After careful prompting, Jack revealed to them why he had pushed for sponsorship over Will, and the group agreed that having a few confidants without that kind of pressure would probably be helpful to him. Brian was reluctant, but Brian was always reluctant. Primarily, this was because they went through members of their little party like parchment, but Brian had been that way about Jimmy as well. Now the two were practically married! For a long time, it had just been the core three for Jack, others leaving or dying. In a couple of months, Will would be past the marker for their longest running fourth/fifth member. Maybe then, Brian would be less of an ass.

The hounds were milling about, giving her licks and headbutts for her attention. She had always heard that Mabari hounds were war dogs, but these seemed like pups in Will's presence. Beverly wondered if they would act like war dogs if anything were to happen to Will.

"Will…" she dared broach. "What are you looking at?"

He absently scribbled something down, another piece to a puzzle only he could see. "Everyone described these children as small, even for their age. They also said that they were hobbyists, they had young aptitudes for trades that didn't have to do with their parents' merchant class aspirations."

That sounded.. Interesting. Could it be possible? "You think that there's a connection."

He nodded. "Jack thinks there's another one, but he's an only child," Beverly mentioned before handing over her own notes.

"Carolus Jacquet Lincoln?" he asked.

"Was called C.J. His family were actually beginners in the Grand Game in Montsimmard. They had only managed a few months before he went missing and the rest were killed two seasons after."

"To the day?"

"To the day."

The possibility surrounded them before Beverly voiced it. "It is possible that he is leading our little band."

"No reports of any sort of illegal activity or cruelty. Usually this kind of behavior has warning signs."

She shrugged. "None whatsoever."

They sat together in the little shack, looking at these notes and wondering, together, how boys with so much could go so wrong.

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After her first secret excursion out of the Chantry, the Sisters watched Abigail closely. The brunette noticed that more often than not someone would have an excuse to be nearby. She did get permission every now and then, as long as it was someone that the Sisters knew, like Will. He had been trying to be close to her, citing responsibility. She was still trying to figure out how she felt about that.

Today, Comte Lecter was visiting. It was, admittedly, a little odd to see him here without Sister Bloom or Will. She had been particularly exhausted after spending her time in the Chantry's gardens, so she remained in bed, despite having a visitor. It was weird, having the man standing awkwardly in the room while she lounged.

“So, are we going to go somewhere today? The Sisters usually like to go through the itinerary before they allow me to leave.”

His Lordship carefully folded the outer robe over his arm. It was for dress purposes only, but she could also tell that he was attempting to be casual with her, as if underdressing made him appear more comfortable around her. That was what she thought, at least. There was always the possibility that he genuinely felt like he could be less uptight around her… She doubted it though.

He nodded, “I have made arrangements with the cloister. For now, I am considered one of your guardians. They are reluctant to allow you to stay with me at this time, until they feel that you are better, but there is hope for the future.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

He sighed. “We are going to my home. I make a hobby of cooking grand meals and would like to share the experience with you. Do not worry, the Sisters will not be able to harass you about leaving if you are back before curfew.”

“Curfew?” she asked. Abigail was not pleased with the thought of staying under metaphorical lock and key while she was still here. “Can’t I stay with you? I have no privacy here.”

He sat beside her, making sure to leave about three inches of space between the two of them. “You need to stay here, in what is currently your own bed.” He raised his hand to stop her. “I know that this isn’t exactly home, but it is for now. You should respect it.”

She pouted, “I have nightmares.” She did. They had been getting increasingly prolific as of late. Immersing her dreams and bathing them in tar and ink. Often, Marissa was a part of them, shoving Nicholas Boyle in front of her. ‘They’re right about you,’ she would say, over and over. Nicholas would just stare, the same horrified look he gave as she drove the knife up his sternum.

“What nightmares?”

Shuddering, Abigail replied, “Marissa keeps showing me Nicholas Boyle over and over, how I left him. Even though she’s dead, I’m afraid she’s going to tell everyone.” She sat up on the bed to sit back against the wall, hugging herself. “Sorry to put this on you; I don’t feel like I can talk about this with the Sisters. I can’t talk about this with the Sisters.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. She thinks it was supposed to be comforting, but it felt heavy.

“There are many who come here to the Sisters to confess every crime and sin before the Maker. You do not have that luxury, less they prostrate you before Him.”

She shied away. It was hard enough knowing that in her head, hearing it aloud only made the agony worse. “I don’t like it, but I have to get used to lying.”

“Just about the one thing.” Like that made it any better, and it wasn’t just the one. She wasn’t quite ready to tell him that though. “When you’re with me, you don’t have to lie about even

that," he said as he exited the room, presumably to speak with the Sisters about her visiting him.

How she wished that was true! The young woman felt sometimes that she would scream into the halls and her bedroom at night just to fill the condemning silence that fell over it. If only she could interrupt the prayers and Chants with sheer terror and frustration, but that would be a crime against the Maker. Part of her wondered if she should do it anyway; it's not like she could offend Him anymore.

In the dream, she could barely understand how she lived with herself, knowing all that she had done. But all of it was for the sake of survival, and getting used to it was just part of the process.

She was a survivor. Maybe one day she would believe it.

It didn't take long for the Sisters to allow her to go, but apparently they were concerned about Sister Bloom's opinion on the matter. Comte Lecter dismissed it, citing the immediate need for food outweighed the wait required for Alana to finish her prayers. It took some charm and promises of leftovers, but they agreed.

"How do you do that?" she had asked on the way out.

"Practice," he had cheerfully replied. She needed to learn that. It would be a useful asset one day, she was sure.

The estate was so different during the day. For one, they had arrived in a carriage. Largely the ride over was rather silent. Comte Lecter had asked if she was considering any apprenticeships, which she shot down. It was hard to find a mentor that would be willing to teach a young woman whose father was a cannibal and had probably fed her people as well. As they exited the carriage, walking in front of the guards and the few servants that he had, Abigail expressed her real interest.

"I want to become a Seeker of Truth!"

He glanced at her with an eyebrow raised. "I know it's not possible," she said. "Seekers are trained from a young age and are usually given to the Chantry or are in training to be Templars before that, but I wish to learn."

He looked thoughtful. "I have heard of some Seekers entering service later in life, but they required strict discipline and extensive training to impress even the Lord Seeker." He smiled. "I would certainly feel safe with you in there, protecting the world from corruption among mages and templars alike."

Abigail knew the likelihood of that actually happening was slim to none, but she liked the idea of it. Saving lives and monitoring corruption among the ranks. She was only seventeen, perhaps they would make an exception. Maybe she would even be like Cassandra Pentaghast, slaying dragons and stopping cults, but that would only happen if she could prove that she wasn't like her father. She needed to do that, so that her possibilities would become endless.

As if sensing her thoughts, Comte Lecter intruded on them, “You are not your father’s daughter, Abigail. Not anymore. Your nature goes beyond what he taught you and to what you are becoming.”

“What would have happened to him if you hadn’t found him?” she asked. Some part of her would always want to know: how far would he have gone, how long before he decided he couldn’t hold back anymore?

They entered the building as she was given her ominous reply. “He would be exactly where he is now. Take heed of your scars and be grateful for them. In another world, you might not have had the chance to get them.”

“Grateful,” she muttered, unhappy. Abigail knew that she was lucky, the ugly slash on her neck that she constantly hid with scarves and high collars would always remind her. Suddenly conscious of it like she hadn’t been since that morning, she tugged on the collar again. Nesiraya, (Abigail had learned her name during her last secret trip to the estate) greeted them and led them up to his Lordship’s private suite.

He noticed her fidgeting. “You’re uncomfortable?” He paused. “What if I could make it less painful for you?”

“What? My dad or the scar?”

He shrugged. “Why not both?” The memories were festering. She didn’t bother mentioning her mother. She never joined her dreams like the rest of her ghosts did, but sometimes Abigail would be reminded of her and have to control herself. It wouldn’t do to burst into tears in front of the Sisters at the cloister. They already worried enough.

She didn’t know if she wanted that to hurt less though. Her mother deserved to be mourned. Her dad… perhaps not so much. She nodded.

“Have you heard of blood lotus?” Comte Lecter asked. Will had told her about that this morning, during their visit to the forest. She pushed away the complicated feelings that came with that trail of thoughts.

“Your Lordship, are you asking me to take something that will cause hallucinations?”

He looked surprised, pleasantly so. “I am, but I am going to make sure it is a small controlled dose. Also,” he continued after a moment. “Please call me Hannibal. We are planning to be close enough that you are well within the right to call me by my given name.” She raised an eyebrow but otherwise made no comment. He led her into what looked like a small kitchen, with the best cooking materials someone could have. It was strange to see a stove and oven beyond the first floor, but apparently his Lordship had managed it well. He set a kettle over the fire to wait for it to boil.

“This isn’t a joke?” She felt like she needed the clarification. He shook his head. They sat in silence, and, after a moment, the kettle took to whistling. In a move that she had seen her mother do so many times, he gently and quickly extricated the kettle from the fire with a heavy cloth and set it to cool on another set on the table. It harkened back to times when she

was sick or sad and her mother made her a special brand of tea that was barely more than elfroot.

He poured a cup of what smelled like a rather expensive blend and pushed it towards her. “Some people believe that entering into a realm beyond this one, at least mentally, can allow them to take hold of the painful and traumatic and change their perception to make them good.”

She scrunched up her face. Changing the fact that her father murdered eight girls and her mother, then tried to murder her, and making it positive… that didn’t sound appealing. “I don’t want to make what he did a good thing.”

Hannibal smiled. “I’m just trying to get rid of nightmares, Abigail.” He held the cup out to her. “Do you trust me?”

His guileless face looked upon her. Would he hurt her? Could he hurt her? She didn’t know for sure, but he had the chance to and refused, back in her old home. He even offered this place to her and saved her from punishment. This was a chance to take something back for herself, a chance to return a piece of her life that her father still had.

The cup still hung in the air between them, and she took it.

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Jack had invited them all back to the barracks, looking less and less pleased by the minute. “Montsimmard, Val Henar, and now Val Falaise.”

They were gathered around a map, staring at three little flags as if they had all of the answers in the world. Around that were small pins where middle boys in well-off but not influential families went missing throughout the Dales and southern Orlais. Jimmy pointed at each of the main flags, “All of the murders took place roughly equidistant to each other around the eastern side of Lake Celestine along the Imperial Highway.”

Brian simply looked irritated. “The cities are only a few days to a week away from each other, but the murders took place weeks apart.”

Jimmy smiled, “Maybe someone spotted them.”

Beverly shrugged, “Well, they’re not traveling with any caravans. It’s not like they need to either.”

“That leaves us with about three towns and a week before the next murder.” Jack began moving all but three of the pins off of the map. “Val Montaigne, Val Colline, and Val Chevans.”

“Which one do we go to?” asked Jimmy.

“We could always throw darts, see what sticks,” Beverly said. It was meant as a flippant joke, but it got her some side eye from a less than amused Jack. He rounded the table to look at it from their angle. “What kind of child does this?”

“What kind of child follows a child that does this?” Will added.

“A shepherd and his flock,” Beverly commented, this time a lot more somberly. “You know what shepherds do to sheep that run away?”

Jimmy walked away from the board, needing to be away from where the others were, and towards Brian near the wall. He looked very affected before he left, and Will heard him trying to speak around potential tears, “They break the sheep’s leg to make it reliant on the shepherd.”

Brian snorted, “Cruel to be kind.”

“Animals remember the voice of trusted people; they also tend to remember the people that abuse them,” Will felt the need to say.

“As far as we know, none of these boys came from abusive households,” Jack said, confused at why Will could bring it up. He had their attention and it was frustrating that he didn’t have their understanding. “It’s simple, when someone is taken, they tend to bond with them to survive. It’s a way to endear themselves to their master and keep from being viewed as a threat.”

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Abigail stared into the middle distance, watching the world drift near and far. It wibbled and wobbled and danced around, which is why she was waiting patiently in a chair and not attempting to follow it. It would be too difficult to catch and she was too tired to try. “Did Sister Bloom say this was okay?” she breezed to his Lordship.

He was currently working around in the kitchen, busy with something over the stove and near the oven. The smell of meat and eggs was so thick, she felt like breathing was eating. He smiled and it turned on its side. “Not at all. She and I often differ in our approach to things. That is why she is in the Chantry and I am not. Far better suited for her.”

Hmm… Another secret for us.

He was setting something on the counter. “You and I will have many secrets. Are you enjoying your experience?”

“I dunno,” she replied. The colors of the air were changing, and she was pretty sure they weren’t supposed to do that. Air was movement, movement didn’t have color.

“Among the Chasind Wilders, blood lotus was often used as a way to achieve spiritual enlightenment. It is said the Rivaini Seers often would use certain herbs to commune with the spirits of the Fade in clearer detail. They allow spiritual experience that many cannot afford. I’m hoping to give you something similar,” he explained while he flipped the eggs and turned the bacon.

“Something spiritual?” she asked. “This feels like the opposite of that. I feel like I’m going to be sick.” She sat so the world would stop tilting back and forth. Was this what it felt like to

be on a boat?

As he prepared the bread, he continued, “Let the feeling wash over you, encompass you. If you embrace it, the unpleasantness will fade quickly.”

She peered over at the food. “That was what my mother was making before she died.”

He nodded. “I am aware. It was the last meal that you were having with them, and it will be the first that you have with me.”

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They were still in the barracks, amongst their notes and the map, desperately trying to figure out what they fuck was going to happen next. Jimmy and Brian had decided to lay down for the night, needing their own beauty rest. Beverly and Will decided to stay awake since it was still early in the day, but understood the lack of ability to get a regular night’s sleep that any of them had. Will had managed to get drawings of the missing boys taken care of, so they might discuss similarities in, but none really stood out.

Alana had come by in an attempt to talk with Will about Abigail, but he quickly shut her down with the case. It was more important for the moment, after all.

Alana looked upon the drawings, voice hushed. “Without a leader, these children would never have been remotely violent.”

“A fuse yet to be lit,” countered Beverly. Will admired her bluntness in the matter, but felt a little embarrassed for his… friend. Alana probably could use someone being a little less cynical; these were children after all, and Alana worked with those without parents and trauma survivors everyday. The thought made Will ashamed however, when he recalled Alana’s strength. Of course she didn’t need this coated in sugar or hidden away, she saw this kind of thing every day in her wards.

Perhaps it was a good thing she was here then. After all, she did have the most experience with children in dangerous circumstances.

Beverly continued, “There’s something in them that has to encourage him pursuing them. If not, he would never happen upon them in the first place, let alone bother wasting his time on them.”

Will paused for a moment, assessing the situation. The pull of the Fade denizens from earlier was calling to him again, but he would ignore it. They had been getting worse as of late, and he didn’t need to tempt them again. He concentrated, pushing past them to his own thoughts and extrapolated what little he did glean from earlier to create a sculpture. He shaped it behind closed eyes, hoping it resembled the model he had only seen falsified.

“Our leader is a boy playing at being a man. He was a paradox among normality, an outsider that didn’t look like one. He’d have been ready for a trade early, might’ve even started training at that time, which would’ve leant to his idea of early adulthood.”

Alana looked at him, a sad smile on her face. “Sounds like you.”

He shrugged, both smarting at the insinuation and reeling from the truth of it. He did. He knew it. The elf hoped that the effect her words had didn’t show on his face. “It does, doesn’t it?” The words sounded hollow, even as he was trying to make light of them.

They looked down at the artistic rendering of Jesse Turner, Connor Frist, and Carolus Lincoln. “Why would these boys follow Lincoln? He’s a child as well, and if he’s intimidating them, what reason do they have to stay?” Alana asked. Beverly looked on as well, continuing her work on the map.

It came to him. “They have brothers, but they can’t relate to them; too much separates children at such young ages, whether it be interests or responsibilities. They are brothers without a brother. This is their attempt to have some that fit better with them.”

She looked up at him. He could tell that she realized what he had. The treatment of the individual members of the family had occurred to her. “Brothers looking for a mother?”

But that simply didn’t make sense. “No, it’s not just Lincoln. There’s already an adult with sway among them, someone calling themselves their mother; they don’t need to look, they were found. She’s creating a family and binding them to her using Carolus.”

Beverly abandoned her map to join them, obviously having heard the last bit of the conversation. “Family tends to have an effect on those considered alienated. You adopt similar principles to be accepted.” She shrugged, “Unless it’s a willing isolation, then you’re stuck.”

Will scrunched up his face. “I never really had that problem.”

“I did mention the exception of willing isolation,” Beverly jested. He smiled.

The next thing that came to him upset him of course. He remembered the love at the scene, so similar to that of Garrett Hobbs, nearly crossing the line to becoming demonic by the sheer quantity and quality of it. “She wants them to be so full of love for her that they burst. They can’t have other families and do that at the same time.”

“She tells them that she’s the only one that loves them and then makes sure that there’s no one left to dispute this,” whispered Beverly. An epiphany spread across her features and she ran back to the map. “There’s a boy that fits all of these descriptions and is about the right time for the next murder. It’s close but not too close.”

“Who is it?” asked Alana and Will realized that he had forgotten that she was there in the midst of all of the confusion.

“Alana,” he began. “This is probably a good time for you to go. I probably will be leaving soon.” She looked like she was going to argue for a moment before thinking better of it. “Let me know when you are back in town,” she demanded, before leaving. Beverly returned with the map and some notes.

“Christopher O’Halloran. He’s about thirteen and had already begun an apprenticeship in full with a local blacksmith. He fits all of the description, right down to the mommy issues.” He picked up her notes and began to read. It was him. This one had to be next.

“We need to get Jack.”

The house of the O'Hallorans was less than a day’s ride from Red Crossing in the city of Val Colline. The Seekers and Will managed to make it to the house before nightfall. Will felt a single pain of sadness for missing dinner with Comte Lecter and Abigail, but someone’s life was at stake.

The thin hour of dusk was settling upon the home, making the world gray with bursts of color. The Seekers approached the home as quietly as they could, waiting before Jack kicked down the door.

The false family was holding the real one at bay with crossbows, but as soon as the new threat entered the picture, they reeled to face it. Madame O’Halloran grabbed her oldest and youngest children and ran, while Messere O’Halloran pulled a child he assumed to be Jesse Turner in a hold. Beverly shot and disabled Carolus Lincoln, keeping him down. Christopher ran off, Jack shouting, “Drop the crossbow, boy!” after him.

Will ran to follow. Behind him, he heard Jack coaxing out the O’Hallorans so that he could remove them from their home and Jimmy was tying up Jesse Turner to take him back to the cart. Christopher had made it outside and when Will exited the home, he found himself face to face with a crossbow aimed in his direction.

He lowered his own and bent to his knees, hoping to appease the young man that had been damaged so badly. “Don’t shoot, Christopher. You don’t have to worry about Carolus anymore, he’s been taken away already. Put down the crossbow.”

From around the corner came an older woman. She was nothing special, perfectly average in every way in appearance, except for her familiarity with Christopher. This must be the ‘mother’. She placed her hand upon his shoulders and leaned down to speak to him, a mockery of comfort and encouragement. “Shoot him, Christopher. Shoot him for me.” She looked up to address him instead. “Drop yours. For him.” He complied.

“You’re his new mother,” he spat.

“I am. You may call me Evangeline. I love him, but I will do what I have to for my family.” He heard the threat in her voice and so did Christopher. The sharp glint of a knife was just barely visible in the sleeve of her dress. The boy shuddered. He, like all of the others, was very plain looking, easy to ignore. Apparently easy to ignore in their own homes as well, no wonder so many people simply passed him by.

“You took him from his own family and had your children kill each other. You burned Connor’s body to honor him in the Andrastian fashion, but how is that loving them?”

She gripped Christopher's shoulders harder and his hands began to shake. Will heard someone moving through the house towards the door and hoped that they wouldn't be too noisy or take too long. "I'm honoring them like their other mothers wouldn't. They're not invisible! They exist and I see them! I love them for who they are, not who I want them to be."

"Then protect him! Don't condemn him."

She grimaced and urged again. "Shoot him, Christopher, like I showed you."

"Christopher," Will begged. "Please."

The boy looked so scared and straight into his eyes. They were brimming with fear and hesitation, warring with each other. Will was a fool to think that the boy was scared of only scared of Carolus Lincoln. He was sure that another second longer and he would be dead.

That's when a crossbow bolt shot through Evangeline's eyes and she crumpled to the ground. Christopher gasped for air, like he hadn't been breathing before, and dropped the crossbow, still loaded. Beverly ran up to pull away the crossbow as Will remained kneeling, barely believing that he was still alive. The others came out, apparently already having dealt with the rest of the false family.

While they took away Christopher, Beverly helped Will back up to his feet. His legs were sore around the knees and he still felt his heart leaping in his ears. She patted his back gently and almost pulled him into a hug, but thought better of it.

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Sister Alana Bloom normally prided herself on being a rational and put together woman, but at the moment the love and compassion that came naturally while following the Maker had fled. The guards of the Lecter estate, so used to seeing her as a bright and kind woman, stayed frozen in her presence now. No one wished to fight her on her presence there, cowed before the tiny human woman in religious frock.

Nesiraya smiled slightly when she entered and eagerly escorted her up the stairs into the private suite for Hannibal and his personal guests. This is where he often did any of his cooking for smaller events, but not where he did his serving. She was abandoned at the door and knocked harshly.

Hannibal opened it to her wrath. "As someone who makes such a big deal about common courtesy, I am a little taken aback," she spat out. "No! I am a lot taken aback that you would take my ward without permission." She paced into the room as he spread his arm open before her. "We are supposed to protect her and not parade her around the people that would see her hurt. Do **not** put me in this position ever again."

He bowed slightly. "My apologies, madame." This did nothing to abate it.

"Rude. Shockingly so."

“You have every right to be upset with me. I overstepped my boundaries,” he deferred.

“Indeed. Taking a young girl from a place of safety and peace to follow you home, where everyone will see her and make their own assumptions one way or another,” she sighed, posture deflating. “I know you don’t mean it this way, but you’re making it harder for her Hannibal.”

His eyebrows furrowed slightly as he rose from his deferment. “And her being around Will isn’t?”

“His outings with her are pre-approved and supervised.” Mostly. “I am in charge of her care, which means it is my job to know where she goes, Hannibal. We already had one person take off with her with the intent to kill her; I don’t want to risk a similar incident.”

Hannibal did what counted as his own version of a shrug before gesturing inwards, towards the dining room. “Is that where she is?’ He gestured again. After she started through the dark marble hallway, he followed and directed her to which area she was going. As they walked, he whispered, “Alana, you were right.”

She snorted, “Often am. But to what specifically are you referring?”

Hannibal paused before the archway leading into the dining room, and asked her to stop as well. “She was not ready to come here. I suppose Will was fine because it was the forest and only for a short period of time, but being here in my home all day made her slightly anxious. I gave her tea mixed with some Crystal Grace to calm her nerves.”

In the dining room, Abigail was sitting at a fully set table for three, laden with bacon and eggs surrounded in a strange kind of bread. She was smiling vaguely and clearly haze-ridden. Alana wasn’t aware that Crystal Grace could produce this effect, but she knew little about most herbs. There was an open place across from her ward with Hannibal presumably going between them at the head of the table. Abigail looked up to her with vacant eyes, “Hello Sister Alana.”

The three places had her side-eyeing Hannibal. “You were expecting me?” she asked her fairly presumptive friend. He shrugged. “Originally, we were expecting Will to be here, but he was called away by Seeker Crawford. We are getting the better end of the deal,” he finished with a charming smile and a flourish. His Lordship pulled out the chair for Alana and began serving the food. The wall opposite open balcony-doors had a water feature added today; a small waterfall flowed in and around deliberately placed indentations in the marble while spraying a mist in the area nearest to it, which spread throughout the room. It served as a natural cooling agent for the room which was usually hot, thanks to its proximity to the kitchen. The wind from the doors paired with it nicely and let the smell of cooked food travel through the space. It created a light-hearted feel, a refreshing environment that sapped away her anger bit by bit.

“Are you hungry?” breezed Abigail, floating far away from it all.

Alana couldn’t find it in herself to stay away from the meal spread out before her, the day was far too pleasant to ruin this meal with her ward and her friend. She could always have a

serious talk with him again later. Right now, with Abigail in the room? It simply wasn't the correct time or place. "I could eat," she replied. The younger woman hummed in reply, beaming at the both of them.

"What is it? What do you see, Abigail?" Hannibal asked. It was an odd question, but given how the two of them both stared at one another like this was the most important question in the world, Alana didn't ask for clarification.

The left side of the young woman's mouth twitched upward and her eyes grew in size. Soon her lips broke apart to reveal hiding teeth, the corners creeping up on her face.

"Family," she answered, eyes watering from the revelation. "I see family."

Alana heard this and turned slightly away from the young woman and back to Hannibal. Vaguely, somewhere buried beneath the good food, trust, advice, and years of mentorship and friendship, she wondered what his Lordship was doing.

Banalhan

Chapter Summary

Will finds himself in a strange position as he begins sleepwalking and worrying about possession or potential contact with demons. He finds himself trying to deny similarities that his situation as with the Lost Dreamer.

Jack's relationship with his wife begins to grow distant, but hopefully similarities between her and the Lost Dreamer help him find his way.

Hannibal begins toying with his surroundings in earnest and exploring his limits with them.

Chapter Notes

08/31/24: Not yet edited

Banalhan: The place of nothing. It is the elven name for the source of the Blight/the place where it was created.

I edited this chapter shortly after playing Man of Medan, can't you tell? (You really want to know, I was writing chapter seven while I was playing.)
Sorry for the weirdness with this coming at the same time as the Vir Dirthara entry (for those of you that actually pay attention), my computer said 'screw it' and I ended up editing and writing the codex at the last minute.

Basically, while writing the chapter, I put down important terms that I'm using and not explaining. When I edit the chapter, I scan for any more. Once I'm done editing, I go through the codex and post Vir Dirthara. Usually this happens a lot earlier in the day, but because it is past midnight for the day this chapter should go up, I'm just posting both.

I actually had a lot of trouble with this chapter. It caused me so much writer's block it's not even funny (basically, it took me about seven weeks before I actually finished the darn thing). When I finished, I wasn't super happy with it, but I'm feeling a little bit better now that I've gone through it again. Strangely enough, I still feel worse about it than I did the previous one.

For those of you unfamiliar with Dragon Age, we're going to be exploring some prejudice in this chapter, aka Fantasy Racism, and oppression. Will visits an Alienage and there is a little (not much) reflection on the way that other people see and are treating him. I've been doing a lot more planning ahead for story arcs (cough Alana cough) and been trying to include more of the cultures and politics of Thedas in the

story. What would be the point in moving the story to this setting otherwise? I feel like this is the first chapter that this really got started. It will start hitting its stride in chapter seven.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His beautiful wife had been there for him when he had gotten home after the incident with the boys killing their families. They greeted each other in only the way that spouses can truly do, and enjoyed each other's company. The family killings had, admittedly, shaken Jack. The others had been contemplating their own lives and growing up, leaving him to think on his large family in Rivain, broken up with some having retreated into the wilds and others converting to the Qun. Well, it was no matter. Jack would continue to serve the Maker and his larger purpose, his life partner by his side. Protecting the weak was almost always its own reward.

The invitation for their presence at dinner came shortly after Bella's return from Starkhaven, the very next day in fact. It was a little strange that his Lordship was so... concerned with his life. It had taken some coaxing, but once Jack had explained the situation to Bella and why it was so dire, she agreed. There was a stipulation though, she got to meet Will at some point.

That was something Jack didn't know how to feel about.

The home of Comte Hannibal Lecter had a grandeur that suited Bella well. She looked radiant in her finery, a picture of stern beauty in the latest fashions. She rebelled subtly against the demands of the Court, wearing slim trousers and a long coat-blouse with billowing tails to resemble a skirt. He had seen many noblewomen look on enviously, as they should. The ensemble was being presented today in all its glory, but her mask, inlaid with tanzanite to compliment her clothing, had been left at home. It was a power move if he ever saw one; there was a reason Bella was an ambassador from Orlais, always politicking.

They were seated in his private dining room, the decorations along the wall changed to fit the season. Firstfall was the beginning of Winter and the deep blues, whites, and purples lent something to it without being gloomy. The man himself glided around the room, placing food in front of his guests without hesitation or misstep.

"Foie gras au torchon with a late harvest sauce and dry and fresh figs. Madame, your husband introduced you as Bella? Are you an Isabelle or an Annabelle?"

She smirked slightly, presence radiating out much like his own (at least that's what Will once told him that he did). It was warm and welcoming and he fell in love all over again. "My name is Phyllis actually, but," here she directed the smirk at him, "he only ever calls me that when we disagree."

His Lordship smiled as he began pouring wine out for them. "Bella for your beauty."

"We were both in Antiva at the time; I had just finished my Vigil, and she was studying under the Montilyets," Jack explained. "As we walked the streets of the Jewel of Rialto, men would

call out ‘Bella, bella’. I knew when we met that I wanted her to be my Bella.” He took a bite of his food to stop himself from saying another embarrassing thing. He was lucky that she found it so amusing.

The contrast in temperatures caused an interesting dynamic for the food that made the flavors more stark, pushing different ones to the surface and fading others away for performance after. “This is delicious, your Lordship. I admire what you’ve done with this meal.” He looked up to notice that Bella was looking at the food with trepidation.

“I apologize,” she said. “I hope I would not be too terrible a guest, but it seems I don’t quite have the stomach for this course. Just a moment and I’m sure that I will love it.” That didn’t bode well. It was important to keep themselves on this man’s good side, and that certainly wouldn’t help. Jack worried about his wife and their host, but a quick glance up to the Comte showed that he seemed more concerned than offended. He sighed in relief, before quickly covering it up with a bite of food.

“Is it too rich?” his Lordship asked, seeming genuinely worried to have upset his guest.

“Too cruel,” she retorted and that was perhaps inappropriate. What had gotten into her?

“Phyllis,” he cautioned, before Comte Lecter continued on a conversation with his wife, without his input.

“Cruelty to animals is one of the first signs of a truly villainous person and can show just how horrible that they can be. I promise, I would never be so terrible as to hurt a creature beyond what is necessary.”

Jack decided that this wasn’t a battle he needed to attempt to fight. Bella could hold her own or give up on her own and probably wouldn’t appreciate Jack interfering.

“In this particular case, I made sure that the gander did not eat more than it chose and only in its natural environment.” His Lordship picked up the plate and gestured it out towards Jack. “Would you like your wife’s serving?”

“Please,” Jack replied, hoping that the lack of waste would appeal to their host.

He passed the plate over to Jack and bowed his head respectfully to his wife. “I employ an ethical butcher Madame Crawford, I insist on it. Only the cruel deserve cruelty.”

She smiled, tension in the room relieved with each passing word. “Be kind to animals then eat them?”

The two chat back and forth and Jack wondered about his dear wife. It wasn’t like her to have such an outburst. They had fought before, arguing up and down the halls of their home back in Val Royeaux, but it was never her yelling. He was the one prone to fits of emotion in arguments while she was cool and collected. Once she had told him, “Jack, I deal with the petty arguments of nobles all of the time. Fits of pique hidden behind fans and masks that result in backstabbing over a misplaced spoon at dinner. Your honesty is refreshing and, even if it makes me want to strangle you sometimes, at least you say what’s on your mind. If I can

handle a bunch of people willing to ruin each other over using the wrong spoon, I can tolerate your yelling." Needless to say, she was always the one to diffuse arguments. As they aged together, his yelling became less and less and they resolved disputes rather cordially, both keeping their heads. Age begets wisdom and all that.

It helped that he had learned firsthand everything she meant about the nobles. Squabbling can be an interesting exercise in maintaining perspective.

Comte Lecter was placing a new plate of food in front of her, an extra helping of the last course that Bella had enjoyed. He paused for a moment before asking, "Your perfume, is it hand-crafted with Ambrosia? It smells like something Messere Durant sells in Halamshiral."

She looked upon him in amazement. "It is. You have a remarkable nose your Lordship."

He nodded, a smile on his face as he sat between the two of them at the head of the table. "Indeed. I first noticed it in my youth, while I was still a young man new to Antiva. One of my mentors was very ill and I was able to notice before the symptoms even started."

To have such a strong nose? Wonder of wonders. "Maybe we should ask you to sniff out a few of our suspects," Jack laughed, and the rest of the table joined. The rest of the night was an excellent experience and the Crawfords went home to enjoy being reunited after long months away.

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Cold feet stumbled on a dirt path through the woods, trampling over brambles and wading through the brush. Thorns pierced the soles and sleep clothes did little to protect from the increasingly cold weather, preparing for the first snowfall of the season. Will was not aware of this, however. In the Fade, he found himself steadily walking down a smooth stone path, a nudge behind him gradually pushing him forward. Where contact was made, warmth seeped and bled into his skin, filling his veins in a rush of hot fluid. It didn't feel like blood, but perhaps it could be.

He needed to move forward, another push keeping him on his feet and moving. Vaguely, he heard what sounded like a person's voice shouting after him, trying to get his attention. A particularly sharp rock broke through the skin on the bottom of his foot and he jerked awake, crying out from the sudden pain.

Behind him, he heard the clanking of armor from one - no, two individuals. Will became very conscious that he was still in his loose (and frankly not very modest) sleep-clothes and very not on his cot in his little home. The armor caught up and someone said, "Hey! Are you lost?"

He stood up and the voice moved in front of him. "What?" he asked, still dazed by unanswered questions. The person in front of him was a young human woman, maybe twenty, in the armor of a guardswoman. Behind her was a young man that kept glancing around, paying attention to the woods. Glancing up at his ears, which were now on display thanks to the sweat pressing his curls to his head, she grimaced. It wasn't hatred, he could tell

that as much, but more of a general sense of dread. Ah! His tattoos. She must have thought that she'd found a wandering Dalish.

She was not entirely wrong.

"What's your name?" the guard asked, gently moving forward.

"Will," he replied with a sleep-roughened voice. She had a torch out which now was illuminating the woods around just so and it was hurting his eyes.

"Do you know where you are, Will?" the young woman asked, hopefully.

He grimaced. "No. Sorry." Her face fell.

"Where do you live?" No wonder she isn't pleased; a couple of guards from a local village going into a Dalish camp could potentially be a death sentence if they were the wrong kind of Clan. If he was from the wrong kind of Clan, he would gladly lead her into that trap. As it was, he was not, but she didn't know that.

He did need to get back though. He couldn't leave the hounds behind. Abigail still weighed on him as well, as much as he needed to distance himself. "I live in a little house near Red Crossing." An idea occurred to him. "I work in Comte Lecter's estate? It's near my home, if that helps."

Relieved, the guard began nodding her head vigorously. Humans always feel better when they think they're dealing with a servant. The tattoos might be excused as a strange city elf pretending to be Dalish. He wasn't sure how she didn't place the accent, but better for him, he supposed. "We're near there. That's good! Um…" She glanced behind him. "Is that yours?"

Behind him sat Winston. Upon noticing the attention given to him by his master, Winston's tail began to wag violently against the brush, kicking up dirt and plants. He gently petted the good boy's head. "Hey Winston," he mumbled, still half asleep.

The young woman approached carefully. "How about we take you home? I can take you to the estate, if that's okay." He nodded.

She carefully held out her arm and he followed beside her, one arm looped in hers. He could tell she was curious about the state he was in, but too polite to really comment on it. At least, the situation that she assumed he was in. Her companion followed behind, ever vigilant.

The long walk to Comte Lecter's estate was done in silence, arm in arm with a guard, Will's feet bleeding along the ground the whole way.

Honestly, he had hoped that when he got there, he could give the two guards the slip and stumble his way back home. The problem with that is that his lead noticed how bad of a shape he was in, delirious and slightly panicky as well as injured, and refused to let him leave her sight until she was sure he was in good hands. The guards and servants all gave him meaningful looks before summoning his Lordship. Great. Just wonderful. Now he woke up

the Comte with his silly little problem and this might be enough that he could reconsider his sponsorship.

Sleepwalking is rare among regular people, but not anything to worry about. Among mages though, it could be a sign of possession, imminent or current.

Fuck.

His fears were unfounded though. His Lordship welcomed him into his home, sending the guards and servants back to their duties or to bed. He even brought Will up to his private suite, somewhere Will hadn't been before. It was a beautiful and elegant living space that suited the man. There was a subtle extravagance to it, a show put on for others. Beneath it, however, was an appreciation for small touches. The man definitely showed off his Nevarran heritage though. An interesting move to remind others of your foreign nature. He had a hard time with people that knew he was an elf, let alone a Dalish one. Comte Lecter had the money to afford to be strange.

Inside the suite, his Lordship offered Will use of his private bath, putting out supplies for him to clean himself with and making sure that his water was fresh and hot. It was heaven and not an experience that Will had really had before. Hot baths were a luxury for the rich or those with a lot of time. He was used to quick sponging down, lukewarm or cold baths, or bathing in a river. It was a very nice luxury though.

Comte Lecter also left out a full healing kit, complete with salves and poultices to help stave off infection and promote healing. It was highly considerate, considering how inconvenient his timing must be. Once he was bathed and patched up, Will went outside to face down the man that welcomed him into his home.

Comte Lecter was in sleep-clothes, Will could tell by how comfortable they looked compared to the man's usual fashion, but they were far more concealing than his own. That… made him very aware of his indecency, but the noble wasn't paying attention. He was settling down, pouring out two cups of a brown liquid. He held one out to Will. "Coffee, from Antiva." Another luxury. Will gladly took a cup, excited by the idea of trying something new and having forgotten his embarrassment in the face of no judgment. It was hot and bitter, but had a robust flavor that spread across his tongue and palate. He watched his host over the rim of his cup, drinking his own 'coffee'. Once it was drained, his Lordship poured himself another cup, before he finally spoke.

"I might be, but I assume that you are not sleepwalking now?"

Will winced. "No. I'm sorry that they got you up. I was going to try and navigate my way back home."

"Nonsense," replied Hannibal as he began to start in on the second cup. "I'm flattered and pleased that your first thought in that situation was to make your way to me. It also pleases me to know that I am a source of safety in this world. We need to trust each other after all."

Will decided to not put out there that coming to Hannibal had been his second thought, not his first. The poor woman looked like she wasn't going to let Will lead her anywhere else

except for the guards barracks, so it was ultimately better letting her take him somewhere that she knew about.

Going to Jack was out of the question. No need to get any Seekers or Templars riled up about potential possession.

“That’s never happened before. Something must be wrong with me,” Will said, hoping to both change the subject and get the first word in on the more controversial topic. Better to put his opinion out in the open and guide the conversation his way.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that something must be wrong with me physically! That’s never happened before, but I hear that physical problems can make you sleep walk.” Among other things he did not say.

“Or stress,” his Lordship felt the need to point out. “There are also works being written on how terrible experiences can shake the mind and even cause them to wander. Perhaps yours is a little more literal.”

While the idea of having another reason that potentially explained what had happened to him other than temporary demon possession sounded wonderful, there was also something about it that simply didn’t sound right. “Are you sure?”

“Under Jack Crawford’s reign, you have gotten your hands very dirty and even killed someone. Most in this line of work have and are used to the trauma, but you are not. You are not a soldier, Will; killing a person is not something you would have ever had to do otherwise.”

“Jack Crawford’s reign,” repeated WIll. “You make it sound like he rules over me.” He did not. *Never again shall we submit.* The voice of his People rang in the back of his head, but this was neither the time nor the place.

“Not rule, then, but he has manipulated you into a position where you must do as he asks.”

“I can leave at any time,” Will responded. “They still haven’t managed to make a phylactery for me, so it’s not like they can track me. I choose to be here rather than leave and I can handle it.”

“Denying the truth of the matter does not make it any less there.”

Will snorted, which he immediately regretted. This man had offered him much when he needed it. “So I can’t handle it?” That he did not regret.

Another sip of coffee while he spoke was taken and Hannibal put down the cup. “What you’ve experienced and done deeply affects you, just like it does anyone else. The only difference is that you, like many mages, hold tightly to your sense of control. A loss of control may simply have overwhelmed you.”

“If my body is walking around without my permission, you’d say that’s a loss of control?” Will snarked. Apparently being tired was not good for his behavior regulation. Fen’Harel take him; he needed sleep.

“Wouldn’t you?” Did he really need to state the obvious so much? “Mages often have to keep a careful leash on their emotions with any outburst being a potential attraction for a demon.” Will nodded. “You’ve been experiencing these emotions as relayed to you by the spirits, perhaps that is putting too much strain on your emotional regulation. You are sympathetic to what they feel and it upsets you. The stronger the spirit, the stronger the effect.” Not entirely accurate, but he didn’t need to tell the Comte that. He wasn’t experiencing them second hand as the man seemed to think, he allowed a union between the two that let him feel the emotions as if they were his own. Non-mages (and even some mages) didn’t realize that for a spirit to manifest from emotion, that emotion had to be strong enough that it would create a being all its own. Experiencing that… It was enticing, feeling in such intensity, and overwhelming.

Perhaps there was some merit to what his Lordship was saying.

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Much progress had been made with Will, but the Comte Hannibal Lecter knew that the trust wasn’t quite there yet. He had to make sure that Will valued his opinion over others and would be willing to actually reveal private information to him. What made it especially infuriating is the presence of someone that had been a part of not one, but two of the most reclusive cultures in Thedas. He had traveled the world to experience the delights of each aspect of the lifestyles of the people, but there were some that he could never visit: that of the Alienages (which he lived vicariously through Nesiraya), the Chasind, the Avvar, the Dalish, the various Dwarven cultures, and the Qunari. Although, he had no interest in experiencing the Qunari lifestyle as anything but second-hand. The rest of them were amazing; he had been forced to rely on works by Brother Genitivi for research, but here was someone that actually lived in them.

That was not the only reason he was fascinated by Will. His mind was deeply fascinating, plagued with darkness and temptation sitting just out of reach, yet able to weather the worst demons every night. He could even reach through the past and translate the alien nature of spirits and demons into coherent thought, understanding killers in intimate detail. He empathized with them.

If that wasn’t enough, Hannibal had reason to believe that Will might be a dreamer, what the Tevinter Imperium would call a Somniari. A person that remained completely conscious while in the Fade (the Realm of Dreams), able to shape them to their will. They were notorious for attracting demons and spirits great and small like catnip, as well as losing themselves and dying young. To have lasted this long would have required great amounts of self-discipline and willpower.

What would he have to do to take that away?

Hannibal was pulled out of his musings by Nesiraya peering in the door. She stood, still and pristine as ever. She nodded her head slightly and departed, showing the guest in that he had

already known would be coming. He had invited her after all.

He rearranged his doublet carefully and left the mask off of his face, but visible nearby. It would be a calculated move to show trust, but he thought she might understand what it really meant. Nesiraya showed his guest in.

“Madame Crawford,” he greeted. “Please sit.” The noble gestured to one of the chairs seated in front of the smoldering fire. It provided plenty of warmth for the room without potentially setting them aflame. He tried to keep the study comfortably warm, what with winter having begun. The woman herself was dressed in a similar fashion as yesterday, a split dress with warm leggings underneath to allow mobility. A large collar bloomed and spiked up behind her head, surrounding her hair pulled into an elegant and tumbling bun. He was pleased that her blue and gold ensemble complimented his gold and blue doublet and high-waisted breeches.

With a couple of glasses of mulled mead, the two began to chat.

“How long have you known?”

She looked away. “Not long. I found out shortly before I left Starkhaven.”

Puzzling. “Have you been seeing a healer?”

She nodded. It took her a moment to elaborate; she didn’t realize that he wanted more information apparently. “There was one with us on the ship and caravan back here. He agreed to follow me to Red Crossing, being a consummate traveler himself. I used to see him almost every day, but now we are keeping it to only once a week.”

“He’s good, then?” Hannibal raised an eyebrow. It was the appropriate reaction after all, traveling healers were either apostates or not good enough for a village to want to keep them.

“Good enough,” she replied. “I think I might stop seeing him, though. I’m tired of prolonging the inevitable.”

A few sips between them passed before he approached her with the next question on his mind. “You don’t intend to reveal this to Jack then?”

“What good does complaining do?” she retorted vehemently. The regal woman shifted in her chair to a more relaxed position. “It would just be complaining. I try my best not to do such things; it makes it easier to be intolerant of complainers.” A spark of humor was there by the end, but the bitterness still infused the words.

“You are allowed to complain Bella,” he assured. She waved her hand dismissively.

“I’m not sure that’s true.”

“Complain to me then,” Hannibal suggested. They stared at one another for a moment before she sighed and slumped.

“Jack sees the world at its worst every single day. I don’t need him to see me at mine. He is far too loaded down to have time to worry about me.”

The inner strength of this woman, to carry herself in such a sacrificing manner for her partner. It was beautiful, her devotion. “You are protecting him.”

“Of course I am!” she exclaimed, despite the fact that her voice was barely louder than a whisper. “He will not protect himself so someone must.” She bowed her head. “This whole thing started as some misguided stab at maintaining my dignity.”

He protested immensely, “This is not undignified. I see strength before me, in its most basic form.”

She laughed. “How strange that I go to you with these things. In the months to come, I know that I will be facing a multitude of indignities. Long nights filled with pain and agony, him hearing me cry out. For now, I am an ambassador and an accomplished player of the Grand Game, an agent of the Empress. Then, I will be a sad old woman, dying in her bed.”

“I hear resentment. Of whom?”

“Of Jack,” she sighed out. “He has so much on his plate, he cannot possibly afford to worry about me as well. Of the Empress. She presses me to work even now, I barely get to stay a week with my husband before I must be off again, this time to Kirkwall.”

“To Kirkwall?” he asked. Strange that such a city in the Free Marches would require an Orlesian ambassador to come forth.

Bella nodded, her eyes showing how tired and alone she felt. “Apparently some Qunari recently landed there. I’ve dealt with Qunari before, from my time in Rivain, so they asked me to monitor the situation and advise the Viscount on how to proceed.”

“So soon after you’ve returned to your husband.”

Tears began to form. “So soon.” They barely existed before she wiped them away and straightened herself immediately. “I regret that I’ve been such a terrible guest. I didn’t mean to come here and vent.”

Hannibal smiled. “I’m happy you came.”

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It had been two weeks since the incident at Comte Lecter’s home, and Will found himself once again wandering, only this time awake and with purpose. They walked around the inn in the shadier side of Val Firmin. It was strange to return here, having been here so long ago when Jack picked him up after a scene. A couple of the guards had approached him, asking for more insight on the original murder (still unsolved?), but he had to explain that he had given them all that he could without more evidence. Apparently no more bodies had popped up since, so they were hoping that the killer was gone. The guards didn’t talk with him otherwise, some giving him strange looks. Maybe they thought that he would have been

dragged off to a Circle after Jack had picked him up. To be fair, Will was still surprised by that from time to time, but while waiting for Jack to decide whether or not he needed Will's presence, he spent some time in the Alienage.

The city elves that he had met bowed their heads in greeting to him. Many of them tried to speak to him, especially when they realized that he was a mage, but just as many ignored him outright. He hadn't been attempting to hide his "maginess" (Brian's words), Beverly Katz was around in full armor outside the section so that would stop him from being carted off, but it still was a bit intimidating. After leaving his Clan, he spent most of his time in the forests, mountains, and with the Avvar. It was only recently that he decided to use his gifts, and he never stayed long enough to see how his people lived there, but Beverly had insisted on it.

The Alienage itself was a cramped little slum that held a lot of life in it. The houses were squat with only a few going up to a second story near the walls. Those, he gathered from a few minutes of watching, held several families inside. All of the homes were made of a combination of wood and brick which ringed around a central point.

A tree. It stood proud and tall over the rest of the homes, banners, strings, and scarves were draped around the branches and dangling below. The limbs of the tree extended out and over all of the homes. A few small decorations made of colored glass and bells were placed as well, ringing with the wind and flashing a beautiful rainbow in the afternoon light. Around the base were small offerings: trinkets, candies, and other things. Little candles were circling the tree and placed gently in knots so they wouldn't hurt it.

Will approached the tree gently and knelt before it. He sat in a meditative pose and allowed himself a chance to spread out. He closed his eyes, hoping to doze lightly and feel the spirits that surrounded this place. Just before he managed it, a hand gently placed itself upon his shoulders and he startled awake.

An older man stood above him, an elf with long grey hair pulled back into a ponytail. "Andaran," he rasped.

"Andaran atish'an," Will replied. It was only afterwards that he considered why the man might not have said the full greeting and he desperately hoped that he hadn't somehow offended the man by "correcting" him. Luckily the elder simply smiled.

"I see that you have been enthralled by the Vhenadhal, brother," he responded.

Will nodded. The man suddenly ducked his head and crouched down to join him. "My apologies. It is not often that one of our brothers and sisters from the forest visit their people in the city, especially not with such respect. I was caught off guard. Allow me to introduce myself, I am Hahren Cyriln."

Will placed his hand over his chest and bowed his head in greeting. "I am called Will, Hahren."

"Called Will?" he smiled. "That sounds like a human name."

He nodded. “It was given to me by the Avvar when I first journeyed away from my Clan. I have kept it since.”

“Left your Clan?” Cyrin asked.

“Yes. We had one too many mages and I was ready to see the world. Upon leaving my Clan, I left my name, “ he answered. It was the truth, if a rather truncated version that lacked any nuance of the situation. Cyrin nodded his head all the same. Perhaps he knew about the rule of three among the Dalish or maybe he simply was just accepting the answer.

“I must admit, I have never been in an Alienage before,” Will commented. “I mostly have spent my time away in the forests and the mountains. It is very interesting to see how our people live here.”

“Sad you mean.” As much as Will was trying to deny it, Hahren Cyrin had a point, as most elders do. The space may be beautiful with the Vhenadhal and the treatment that the elves had given it, but beyond the charming people and children playing, beyond the smiling faces and hard workers, there was a sadness here. These people had been beaten down, forced to live in a small squatters’ slum with a wall surrounding it and a gate leading back out into the main city. The people seemed to vary between struggling for even some bread to the comfortable end of poverty. Everything was extremely dirty, even the food, and there was evidence of illness in a few of the children already and winter had only really just begun. Two more months of harsh weather and only a little good wouldn’t help in the slightest.

Cyrin saved him from having to reply. “You do not have to say anything. I know that you think so. I also know that you are unlike some Dalish that I’ve met. Your eyes, when they wandered through our little home, did not sit in judgment of how we live. You did not stare at us in sadness for not keeping to the old ways. You see our situation through the lens of how we are, not who we are.”

“I see both,” he argued.

“But not in a way that puts the blame on us.”

He didn’t. Perhaps a few years ago, when he was still young and fresh from the forest he might’ve, but the Avvar quickly disabused him of that notion. In those days, he would’ve judged Beverly for being a “short-ear” and would’ve shot an arrow at Jack rather than work with him. In those days, he would’ve ignored Abigail or saved her and then left her to her own devices. Life happens wherever one is and the people here kept to the old ways the best that they could. Living in the past hoping for the glory of the elves of Arlathan would only harm, not heal. He said as much to the Hahren.

“You are wise beyond your years. It is a pity that your Clan will not be having you as its Keeper.”

From the side, Will saw Beverly motioning for him to go to her. “You are too kind, Hahren.” He rose from his kneeling position and helped the elder up. “Now, I must take my leave, much to do. Dareth shiral,” he said as he parted ways with the old man.

He heard a faint “shiral” behind him.

Apparently Jack had decided that he needed his presence after all. Will left, feeling both reluctant and relieved. It was hard seeing the suffering of his people in a place like this. Beverly was right to show him that.

They ventured back to the inn, a dingy establishment called Wheeler’s Deal, that had been clocked off and had guardsmen waiting at every corner. None of them even tried to stop the Seekers from coming through, regardless of it involving a mage. “The name on the books for the room was a Jacques Martin, along with every other room in the building.”

Beverly snorted behind him and tried to hide her budding laughter. “Appalling lack of imagination,” Will deadpanned.

“Well,” Beverly added. “People pay for places like this to not report them to the guards, not make sure that their stories and alibis are good.”

Shrugging, Will replied, “They still could have come up with better names.”

Jack tsked at them. “Children.”

“Sorry,” they replied.

After waiting a moment to at least appear slightly chastised, Will asked, “Was the room registered to one of the victims?”

Jack shook his head. “Couldn’t tell even if it was, but everyone else is accounted for.” The Seeker smiled viciously, and Will was sure that a few of those people did not enjoy the process.

They went up the stairs to the side of the inn, and just as they were about to go inside, Jack stopped Will. Beverly paused as well, but he motioned her inside. She obeyed. “The two bodies were displayed and mutilated almost beyond recognition. There weren’t any organs or other parts missing, so we managed to rule out the Highwayman, but it shares the same brutality. Prepare yourself.”

“I’m prepared,” Will breezed, already cocking a half-smile for his friend.

Jack rolled his eyes. “Perhaps prepare a little more. It’s practically Fereldan stew in there.”

This turn of phrase confused Will. ‘Fereldan stew’ was bland and difficult to eat; it’s hard to chew through a pot filled with vegetables, grains, and meat that have been so overcooked that they have become a uniform grey mush.

“Ew?” he responded, more disgusted by the image than actually worried about going in.

“Look,” Jack replied. “For once, they begged for us to be here. I have no clue whether this is actually a relevant case for us going in, but when guards and Templars are calling for the Seekers, something is wrong. We just happened to be the closest group. They’re thinking a blood magic ritual gone either horribly wrong or horribly right. Neither of those things are

particularly good, especially for you. So, I need you **to be prepared** .” Will nodded; his superior clearly had a reason. Probably. Fingers snapped in front of his face.

“I was talking to you,” he heard Jack say. “Where’s your head Will?”

The young elf shook his in reply. “Still in the Fade, I’d wager, but I’m trying not to remain there.”

Jack harumphed good naturedly and then gestured towards the door they were stopping in front of. It looked like every other in the inn, nothing strange to say that something terrible lay on the other side. “I’ve got something that’ll bring you back to reality.” And wasn’t that foreboding?

Entering the room was a mistake. It seems that more than one person had come in there and promptly vomited, by the amount that was on the floor by his feet. The room stank of rotting meat and it filled the space so much that coming in felt like he was meeting a physical wall of rot. And that was before looking at the bodies.

They were people at some point, that much was sure. They had been skinned so completely and removed anything attached with cartilage that it was impossible to tell what they may have looked like. Stature made it more than likely humans, but there was a chance for them to be robust elves, tall dwarves, or petite, hornless Qunari. They were kneeling on either side of the bed, hands outstretched to the pillows, surrounding a lump or crease that implied someone had slept there. The muscles in their chests had been gently unstrung and braided around their arms and the ribs were broken outwards. From where he was standing, Will could see that the cavity was to expose their hearts, charred and nearly ash.

“I-” Will didn’t know where to begin. He cleared his throat. “This doesn’t seem like blood magic to me.”

“That’s what I said,” piped in Jimmy. The man was rummaging around the room to his right, attempting to figure out if there was anything going on around the bodies that they couldn’t see. “In my experience, blood magic rituals tend to involve runes or, at the very least, circles. This is just someone posing two bodies.”

“I didn’t say that it wasn’t a ritual,” Will breathed out and gathered the attention of Brian and Beverly.

“Still seems rather unorganized,” sniffed Jimmy.

Will felt himself trying to reach out. The awe that was lingering in the room was palpable. Was his connection through the Fade getting stronger? That didn’t make sense; it couldn’t be possible. He shook his head, trying to concentrate on the here and the now. He could hear it in his head:

“At last did the Maker from the living world make men. Immutable, as the substance of the earth, with souls made of dream and idea, hope and fear, endless possibilities.”

Beverly looked up and he knew that she had thought the same as he. She continued for him, "Then the Maker said: 'To you, my second-born, I grant this gift: In your heart shall burn an unquenchable flame all-consuming and never satisfied.'"

Brian raised an eyebrow at him, "You know the Chant of Light?"

Shrugging, Will replied, "Sometimes one gets curious about the things people learn and worship. This is especially true if the text in question is found in an outhouse."

Jimmy and Beverly burst out laughing while Brian made a face. Jack remained in the corner, out of the way of the rest of the group. Beverly decided to start extrapolating, "So he was attempting to create people? Out of people? I'm a little confused."

WIll shook his head. "He's breaking them down to their base selves, returning them from a stagnant form of life back to the potential of a new soul, revealing the burning core to the world."

"That's kind of missing the point though," Brian replied. "The reason that the Maker favored His second-born was because they weren't a myriad of possibilities repeating over and over; they became something and grew upon it."

"Brian," Jimmy interrupted. "He's not trying to make them formless. That's not the point. Besides, spirits are formless or created copies of things already in existence. They never made or make anything new."

"This is returning to the starting point," continued Will. "Something before life begins."

"So we might be talking about someone that is either extremely pious or simply familiar enough with the Chant to get some inspiration," said Brian, walking around the bodies. "If he's using the doctrine to model their deaths, does that make him pious?"

"There have been stranger things," stated Jack. Considering that 'stranger things' seem to be the definition of their existence currently, none of them could really deny the truth of the statement.

Beverly had been over near the head of the bed and finally shared her deduction, "He slept here. Not sure if it was a great night sleep though, the sheets are still wet with sweat."

The zeal and righteousness hit him to the core when he drew nearer to the bed. "Madness slept here last night," Will breathed out. No one was paying attention to him, too busy trying to see if there was anything else in the room.

"There was vomit already in the room when we got here," began Jack. It went unnoticed to him, but a few guards near the doorway that were the cause of the rest of the vomit shifted uncomfortably. "So he's sweating, probably nightmares, and vomiting. Maybe he couldn't handle it?"

"I don't think this is fearful, Jack," Will said. He had almost said that it didn't **feel** fearful, but he hadn't gone to sleep yet. Best not to worry Jack at the moment. "If it's as religious as we

think, it could be more righteous. He thinks he's bringing them back to a state of innocence and possibility, taking away any good or bad that they had done in life." Jack raised an eyebrow and motioned to the room at large from low to high. Will grimaced, knowing what Jack was asking. "I'm going to need to lay on the bed."

"Bring me a sheet!" Jack yelled to the guards at the door. "Get someone to strip the bed please."

The guards shuffled in and, with the help of a maid, began stripping the bed. They looked as uncomfortable as they could possibly be, glancing back and forth between the bodies posed where they are trying to work and Will, clearly in Dalish dress and armor with his staff. Jack noticed this and pulled him aside slightly. "Will, I understand your reluctance, but perhaps we can get you some clothes or armor that doesn't make the townspeople wary of you." Will gave him a dirty look in the most respectful way possible.

"I'm not going to change my dress just to make some humans feel more comfortable around me."

The Seeker sighed and rubbed his forehead. "It's not just the humans though, is it?" It wasn't, but was already irritated as it was and didn't like to be reminded of the fact that fellow elvhen stared at him too. "Beverly told you," he sighed out.

"She didn't, you just did." Venhedis lasa.

"It's done, Seeker," said one of the young guards as the others left.

Jack sighed and motioned to the bed for Will. "We will talk about this later," he added and left the room with the others. Beverly waved at him on the way out as Will maneuvered onto the bed. It required some work, as he had to come at it from the end due to the bodies being on the immediate sides. They had been moved slightly with the new sheet being fitted, but it wasn't that big of a concern at the moment. Before he laid back, Will took out his herbal powder and poured it into his mouth before taking some water to wash it down. A few moments after his head hit the pillow, he entered a light doze and drifted into the Fade.

He was so wrong.

Buried beneath all of the trappings of righteous zeal was a fear so palpable that it was indistinguishable in its passion, bursting forth from his hands and feet.

The bodies sat before him, a man and a woman. Their faces were still spread in terror and anger, even after they died. He was doing them a favor. They were free now, no longer bound to this world. He gave them a gift.

The gift of being without the trappings of flesh and the burdens of the past.

They were sinning no longer and no longer were defined by their sin. What reduced them to base and inferior creatures was gone.

We were all rejected by the maker for Pride, Wrath, Fear, Envy, Sloth, Desire, and Despair. The demons that bring us all harm and to which we are vulnerable no longer have a place in their minds and hearts.

If only he could be as free as them. Perhaps… perhaps with them as his guardians, they could guide him into the Fade where the demons do not tread.

Free me.

Protect me.

Guide me as I slumber.

The rest of the experience in the Fade was rough, and that was being generous. He left the space feeling sticky and stuffed. Thick molasses and glue held his limbs in place, forcing him to push and swim. Beverly had to help him walk the first few minutes after he had woken up and it honestly made Will worried that a sloth demon had been nearby and he hadn't been aware.

To keep his mind off of the monstrosity that was his mind, Beverly had begun a game among the group. They would try to recite either a well known quote or part of a story and the others would guess what it was and/or where it came from. So far, Jimmy was winning. Apparently some person named Karsten Groeke had actually gone to the University of Orlais and attempted to give a lecture on the nature of green. It had ended poorly with the ill-fated philosopher-poet being run out by students with very red tomatoes… something about an ode to chartreuse.

Nobody had believed Jimmy at first, but then they got a hold of someone that had apparently been at the lecture and corroborated Jimmy's story. He was no longer allowed to play the game.

Will was just fascinated that he had bothered to memorize the whole thing.

The rest of them continued the game while they were examining the bodies. Jimmy stayed with them, mostly to make fun of Brian. It had helped through the prepping process while Will had to keep the bodies preserved. At the moment, Beverly was standing before them in a part of the room that had the least amount of equipment and paperwork. She held her hand over her heart and was reciting grandly to the room: "Mother dearest, look away, look into the sun. Other's nearest, gone astray, you will be undone. For no more will I prattle, and no more will I pray. Hear you must the rattle, as life will fly away." The three of them paused to give a quick round of applause.

Brian paused for a minute before crossing his arms triumphantly. "Shred of Blue," he crowed but immediately deflated when Beverly shook her head.

"She of the Highwaymen Repents," Will replied. He received a resounding thumbs up from Beverly and smirked over at the shamed Brian. The curly haired man frowned deeply.

“Fine. It’s my turn.” He paused for a moment before he began (accompanied by vast arm motions and vague gestures):

“Oh!

The best of us ran when the dreadnought was sighted!

Nuggins, Nuggins! For he heard the call.

Tripped nine Qunari, and that's why he's knighted!

Nuggins, Nuggins! As brave as he's small!

Oh!

A shore full of pirates, the worst set to happen.

Nuggins, Nuggins! His heart pure and true.

Tripped him an admiral, now he's our captain!

Nuggins, Nuggins! For me and for you!

Oh!

The blight was upon us, and we found no pardon.

Nuggins, Nuggins! Now he'll make a stand!

Tripped up the darkspawn, and now he's a Warden!

Nuggins, Nuggins! For all in the land!

Oh!

Paraded through Kirkwall as hero and winner!

Nuggins, Nuggins! Stubborn and vicious!

Tripped up a viscount, now he's for dinner!

Nuggins, Nuggins! Of course he's delicious!”

“Where did you hear that?” Will asked, amused at the antics. It also helped that Brian had been miming out the tale as he went, including a little tapping jig.

“From a guy in the tavern the other night. This was right after he broke a hole in the ceiling and declared himself the King of the Nugs. Shortly after, he proclaimed his godhood; that’s when the tossing of chairs and roasts began.”

Snorting laughter could be heard from outside as a couple of guards walked past, one woman miming Brian’s jig. He immediately went to the corner furthest from the door and hung his head, having decided that he no longer existed. Beverly smirked at Will and shook her head. “Well it wouldn’t be the first time that someone thought that they were comparable to the Maker, but I’ll admit that this had lower stakes.”

“That’s true,” replied Jimmy. “We also don’t have to worry about this guy creating the Darkspawn and starting Blights.” At the mention of ‘this guy’, the Seeker had gestured at the bodies.

Brian lifted his head to join the conversation, finally pulling himself away from his shame. “Wonderful. I’ll admit taking a little gore instead of potentially world-ending threats.” Jimmy nodded his head sagely.

Will stared at the preserved bodies intently, trying not to look too closely at the cavities filled with ashes. Beverly was look at the limbs carefully, trying to see if there was any trauma on them. Well, trauma that wasn’t caused by their group. The bodies were laying flat now, which required them gradually stretching the limbs back and forth until they were loose enough to go into their new places. The way that they had frozen had made them difficult and obnoxious to transport. It took time and now some of the muscles had a browner look to them, but at least they were easier to move. His preservation glyphs had helped. For a spell that he usually used to keep food, it was getting a lot of use lately. “Kneeling in supplication to their new overlord?” Beverly asked, and although she was facing away, Will could hear her grin. At the moment, he couldn’t be bothered.

“Prayer? It did seem that they were based off of the Chant’s earliest versions of man,” commented Jimmy. Currently he was looking at the records kept at the inn, not that they were much help.

“I don’t think they were praying to him, but maybe they were praying for him.” Then it hit him, fear so strong that it was made manifest. A demon? Was that what their new ‘friend’ was afraid of or was there a demon already involved? “He’s afraid,” Will said before he knew he needed to ask the rest of them, “What was the next part of the Chant?”

“Huh?” they all replied.

“The Chant. What was the next part? The immediate next few lines.”

Brian scoffed in the corner, as if he was amused at the fact that Will didn’t know this. He had admitted early to have a researcher’s interest in the Chantry, but he wasn’t psychic.

Jimmy was the one that remembered. Take that Brian. He recited it with the rhythm of someone that was used to the feel of the words in his mouth. “Then the Maker said: ‘To you, My second-born, I grant this gift: in your heart shall burn an unquenchable flame, all-consuming and never satisfied. From the Fade I crafted you, and to the Fade you shall return each night in dreams that you may remember Me.”

“He wants a guide.” He needed someone to take him through the dreams and away from the demons. His victims were ‘returned’ to the Fade and he perceived his killing of them to be a way to make them innocent enough to not attract demons and lead him through to safety. That means he has to be aware enough in dreams to think a guide could help and see himself as a danger in the Fade. “ A mage,” said Jimmy. For some reason that felt wrong, but it was the only thing that made sense.

“A mage?” asked Brian.

Will elaborated on his earlier point, “I thought I felt a demon earlier. I think one’s been attracted to him and he wants a guide to lead him away from it. He thinks that he’s making them innocent to not attract demons themselves and by killing them they have returned to the Fade naturally and will make acceptable guides.”

The slick was still weighing and sloshing through his brain when Will returned to Red Crossing and he decided that he was actually going to meet with the Comte again. Part of him was feeling like just abandoning the whole thing altogether, but that would mean a hunt would begin very quickly. He didn’t want to have to turn around and see Beverly or Jimmy chasing after him. Maybe if it was Brian, he wouldn’t mind.

That was a lie. He would still mind.

Thus, he went.

They were currently standing by the Comte’s desk as the man in question pored over any paperwork for the day. He had been monitoring the situation in Val Royeaux, and apparently a couple of new powers had decided to make moves. Or so he had told Will.

“I often wonder,” the Comte began.

“Dangerous past time,” said Will. The man smiled.

“I am curious about your opinions on religion, Will.”

The elf in question raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

Noble or no… his Lordship was strange? Asking an elf about religion was tantamount to social suicide, had anyone of clout been there. As it were, Will didn’t particularly care beyond the fact that the man kept templars off of his back with that power.

“You’ve been among, if not a part of, three different religions. I'm just curious how you find them.”

The statement was accurate, and Will took a moment to try and give the hanging question the attention it deserved. Religion was a funny thing, when you are an elf. Well, when you are a Dalish elf. To give up the Creators was tantamount to give up one's own identity. His people had held on to their culture and lifeways as much as possible and losing that would be another piece gone. They had already lost so much.

He wondered, for a while, whether or not he had ever truly believed anything he was told. It is one thing to invoke a god's name simply as a piece of heritage and another to worship one in earnest. Will still wondered on occasion. For the most part, he believed that the Creators were real in some capacity, but came to his own conclusion about their nature; he believed them to be immensely powerful spirits with enough pull that they could once shape reality beyond the Fade. Eventually they must have been locked away by Fen'Harel, just like it said in the stories, and their power vanished.

A lot of this came from his relationship with the Avvar. He had been taken in by Wyvern Hold not long after he finished his adulthood rites. A dirty and starving young man, practically feral, had been discovered on the mountainside by a hunting party. They had brought him into their homes, nursed him to health. His first few months had been a process of becoming a person again; the spirits of the mountains had nearly driven him mad. Eventually they had taken him to the Augur, their version of a Keeper (he often heard shem call them 'Shamans'), who taught him about his gifts and sensitivity towards spirits. At first, he had refused to listen; his Clan had taught him that all spirits were dangerous and even his own interactions were nothing on the scale that the Augur was encouraging. It was only after careful teachings and observations that he understood what the Avvar were communicating: spirits are natural phenomena. They exist where people exist. The Avvar saw them as signs, teachers, harbingers of beauty and destruction in equal measure. To them, they were forces of will and nature. Training under Augur Skyweaver allowed him to refine his gifts and control their messages, something even they couldn't do.

Will admittedly had some trouble reconciling their calling the spirits 'gods', especially when they had an actual pantheon that they worshiped. He eventually realized that 'god' was not a set term that someone could define for every person, but that didn't make it easier.

"Religion is mutable," finally Will said. "Asking for my opinion of religion is like asking me to explain the 'universal' experience one has of being in the Fade to a dwarf. It means different things to different people and if you ask five people what something really means, you'll get seven different thoughts on the matter."

"Hmm…" replied Comte Lecter. "I apologize for the strange topic, but after listening to you and Seeker Crawford discuss the murders, I've been curious about spirituality."

"Spirituality?" WIll asked, curious himself about the trail of thought.

"Our friend has been exploring his own in some detail."

Will sighed, less than happy that they were already beginning. "Look, I am almost positive that this person has a demon following him, or at least believes that. That kind of situation is enough to make any person desperate."

“A mage?”

Will paused for a moment, thinking carefully about how he was going to explain this. “I’m not sure he is. At first, I thought that maybe our killer is a mage, but, upon reflection, something about the bodies made me think that perhaps we’re dealing with someone non-magical. ”

“Oh?”

“His focus on the spiritual aspect was very basic and the whole scene looked like a ritual, close to a blood magic ritual in fact, but it didn’t feel like one. If he was worried about a demon, I’d doubt that a mage would choose to create something so close to summoning one.”

“A demon arriving by something other than blood magic?”

Will shrugged. “A lot of people like to forget that non-mages can become possessed as well. All of the fear in that place was enough to draw a demon on its own, no ritual required.”

His Lordship finished the last bit of his various documents and set it aside to look over at Will. “He feels afraid?”

Will scoffed. “Yes, but abandoned is perhaps a better word. His Maker has left him to the whims of a demon.”

“Do you feel abandoned?”

Creasing his brows, Will looked at Hannibal, stared really. The man was attempting to meet his gaze, try as Will might to avoid it. Admittedly, Will was too busy trying to study his Lordship’s face for tells rather than avoid it entirely. This was too important, though; that sort of question never came from nowhere. “Why do you ask that?”

Sighing, Comte Lecter stood up and walked around the desk towards him. The man was only a few inches taller than him (Will was tall for most elves), but the noble had the same sort of physicality as Jack Crawford. His sheer presence filled the room, making the height distance between the two of them much more than it actually was. “I am concerned. Seeker Crawford seemed quite content with the result of our first discussion; so content, in fact, that he has not attempted to follow up on your health.”

It felt like a lie or a half-truth. Defenses of Jack jumped to his lips, but died in his tongue. Their taste lingered until they became acid. Jack had made some inquiries, at least to Will, but how sincere were they? The Seeker had said that his presence with them was at least partially for his protection, but it was more likely that this “fact” was more to keep him from running. After all, he hadn’t been caught thus far and didn’t plan to be again.

Then, he was stung by a stray thought, wandering too far from its source. “Are you trying to drive a wedge between the Seekers and I?” Will asked, fighting the urge to stare at the man above his shoes. The Comte didn’t respond, joining Will in his shoe study.

“That was not my intention, but I do wonder,” Lecter replied. “Jack promised to protect you, but I see a lot of you rescuing him.” When Will gave him a confused stare, he elaborated. “The Seekers of Truth have responsibilities to the world and they are either not doing them, or doing them incompetently. You’re the one finding suspects and solving crimes.”

“I couldn’t solve any crimes without the Seekers solving them with me!” Will snapped. “What is your role in all of this? Why do you get an opinion on the people I work with?”

The noble suddenly went very still. Or rather, he made his stillness apparent in a way that Will realized the man barely ever moved.

“My job is to help you understand yourself. That can mean guiding you on your path through the Fade and helping you understand the poor souls you are attempting to catch. Oftentimes, it means telling unpleasant truths.” Will unintentionally breathed in and out in time with Hannibal. Three breaths came and went before words were spoken again. “I am worried, Will. You are in a very vulnerable position.”

“Well so is our murderer. If we don’t find him soon, something drastic may be done… or he’ll become an abomination.”

Comte Lecter tilted his head ever so slightly to the side and it made Will want to shake him. He was so impassive sometimes that the elf just wanted to ruffle his feathers. “Wouldn’t it be better to get it over with?” his Lordship inquired. “He is probably going to die anyway. If there’s a demon following him, it would only be a matter of time before he is possessed or killed.”

Maybe that was what their murderer thought, too. If Will was right, and their friend was just a normal man being tracked by a monster, there would be no escape for him. It wasn’t like the Chantry made normal people Tranquil and there wasn’t a way to prevent someone from being latched on to by a demon, short of killing the demon or the person. Their killer had gotten desperate enough for murder; how much longer before there would be suicide?

“Thank you, your Lordship. You’ve given me much to think about,” Will replied and then walked home through the woods, hoping that tonight he would get some actual rest.

~<( )>~

The Crawfords were staying together in a guest house off of Comte Lecter’s estate. After the Seekers had approached Lord Froideveaux and Comte Lecter about staying in the area, his Lordship offered lodging. Being the head of the group and having a higher authority than most Seekers, Jack had been offered the esteemed guest house, which he was immensely grateful for now that he had his wife back. The rest of the Seekers were staying with Lord Froideveaux or at one of the inns in Red Crossing proper. His crew specifically had chosen to stay in Red Crossing. Lord Froideveaux made them uncomfortable.

The home managed to be cozy even with vaulted ceilings and a distinct un-lived in feel. Well, it usually did, especially after his wife joined him. The problem was that no matter how cozy the house felt by itself, their bed had been feeling increasingly frigid. Bella had begun working later and later to prepare to leave for Kirkwall. Whenever he asked, she cited the fact

that she needed to be properly updated on Free Marcher politics and the customs of the city, as they all tended to be wildly different. He had to accept it, even if he thought that something else might be going on instead. What kind of husband would he be if he wouldn't extend trust to his wife?

As he prepared for bed, Jack hoped, perhaps in vain, that his wife would join him. Prior to her journey to Starkhaven, they had always joked when preparing for bed, laughing about the latest Orlesian fashion or scandal. He would tell her ridiculous stories of new recruits and what strange kind of magic he had dealt with (and one very memorable tale about a scholar that gave a lengthy lecture on the nature of 'green' when he was visiting the University of Orlais). As he laid down and snuffed out the candles, he couldn't help but long for a happier time.

It had been an hour and the constant speculation on why his wife had become so distant had been keeping him up. Just as he was about to forcibly shut his mind down (and maybe send a message to Will and ask him if he could have some of his sleeping herbs), he felt a dip in the bed beside him. Said weight moved until it was halfway between him and the edge of the bed, trying to keep a good distance. He sighed.

"Do you always wait this long to join me? It's been an hour and you know very well it could have waited until morning."

She sighed back. A couple of sighers they were, apparently. "I'm going to be leaving soon and I'd rather not do all of the research last minute, especially when it feels like I barely have a grasp of it."

"You were just in the Free Marches."

She laughed, but it wasn't the kind he wished for. "You know very well that they may have a unifying name, but the individual city-states couldn't be further apart unless they were actually across the map."

He sat up and took a minute to light a candle so that he could see her face. The light was small, and he blocked a large portion of it, so it only lit the side, her cheeks growing sallow under its warmth. Jack knew he couldn't hold it over the bed, the wax would drip and then they'd be miserable, so he'd have to content himself with what he had. She didn't sit up as well, even with the light, laying down and glancing up at him every so often. A feeling rushed into him, and he knew that she was hoping he would give up talking or she would fall asleep before he was done.

"Would you like to speak about what's bothering you or should I go back to pretending nothing is happening?"

She looked him in the eyes, as if that would convince him that what came next wasn't a lie. "Nothing is happening."

Realizing that he remained skeptical, his wife continued, "I'm just stressed Jack. The Qunari landing in Kirkwall is a large deal and must be handled with delicacy. If not carefully watched, it could end in disaster."

“Just work?” he asked, skeptical. Bella had been in so many situations before that required delicacy, his wife handled those kind of things ruthlessly, her touch excessively subtle. It had never brought in this kind of response before.

“Just work,” she attempted to assure. Her husband still looked doubtful. “There’s not much you can do Jack. Not only can you not go with me, you have your own duties here, but it’s not a Seeker’s place to be political. They’ll accuse the Chantry of conspiring with Val Royeaux or claim you a spy.”

He decided to change tactics. “At the very least, allow me to ease some of the burden. I can take notes for you for later or maybe talk strategy.”

She turned around so that her back was to him. “I need to do this myself Jack.”

An eyebrow went up. “Confidential?”

The shoulders tensed and relaxed. “Very.”

She wasn’t going to turn and face him, so he moved to lay back down. After settling, he felt the need to speak still. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No.”

He rolled over to face her back. It was disconcerting to not see her expression. “So, as your husband, I can leave you alone and not ask questions.”

Finally, she rolled over again, looking so very tired. He hadn’t seen her tired like this in a long time, not since her mother became extremely ill. The Seeker remembered that time was hard on both of them, but especially Bella, who had to watch her mother’s decline. “You can ask me what you wish,” she bade him, eyes drooping and sad.

Whatever sort of fight that he had in him deflated. There wasn’t time for it. “Whatever you’re sorting out, I’m sure you’ll take care of it. Or is this us now?”

The beautiful woman that he shared a life with smiled sadly and caressed his cheek. “I don’t want it to be us.”

He took her hand and kissed the back of it. “I love you, Bella.”

Retrieving her hand, Bella replied, “I love you, too.”

As the two relaxed, he whispered to his wife, “When there is something I can do, you promise to tell me?”

He was almost asleep when she said, “I promise.”

Neither of them spoke more that night, but they didn’t sleep well either.

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The next day another body was found, this time much closer. The whole scene had been protected and left up for them, which was gross for a three day trip. Luckily, the weather had been turning cold now that they were fully into Winter and that had slowed the decay of the body. Even though they had tried to hurry through the trip, the snow was so thick that it had actually slowed their journey down to its regular time frame.

The scene was inside of another motel, but this time the body was laid out onto the bed. Once again, it was skinned and the heart was burned inside of the body, leaving it unrecognizable. The genitals had been stabbed repeatedly, almost as if they had offended the murderer. His colleagues had taken him to calling them the Lost Dreamer.

“Why this?”

“He’s trying to return to Fade or to the Maker. He wants them to be his guides and protection, because a demon is potentially following him or he feels that way at least. He wants peace.”

This seemed to puzzle Jack even more. “A demon is involved?”

“Potentially,” Will clarified. “I personally believe so, but that in and of itself isn’t proof.”

“And where did this -“ Jack gestured to the body hanging above them, “come from?”

A thousand ways to explain it and not many favorably. Andrastians didn’t tend to like it when their Chant was used improperly, and if someone actually came up with a reason behind its use… even worse. “Our friend seems to be drawing from the Chant of Light, particularly the Canticle of Threnodies. He’s trying to make them as the Maker originally made people,” Will slowly said. Jack didn’t seem to be reacting badly, which was a good sign.

“Wonderful,” Jack said blandly.

“He can’t find any reprieve, so he’s looking for it where most people do: religion.” Jack shook his head at Will and the two started when they heard shouting from near the body.

“What are those?” came the half-strangled exclamation from Jimmy. He was backing away from the body while Beverly peered down at them with a small stick.

“It seems our friend has made himself a eunuch,” she replied, her voice wavering in the strange in-between of amusement and shock.

Brian looked up at the body and, after a few moments, helpfully informed the others, “Not the victim.”

Beverly rolled her eyes. “I know it’s not the victim.”

“Our little Lost Dreamer then?” asked Jimmy. “Why in the Void would anyone castrate themselves?” Beverly shrugged. It wasn’t helpful. Will and Jack decided to carefully approach the commotion.

“Is this his way of trying to make himself free?” Jack asked, but the sound of the words sounded wrong. Will couldn’t explain it, it was almost as if his whole body was rejecting the

idea. It made his skin crawl off.

“No.” Will dislodged the thought from his mind and into the open. No use keeping it there. “If it’s true that he’s being haunted by a demon, it’s very likely that he’s trying to lessen its hold on him.”

“A desire demon, then?” asked Jimmy.

Brian butted in, “I don’t see why anyone would think that castrating themselves would be a good idea otherwise.”

“That feels so base, though,” said Beverly. “I’ve not gotten the impression that our friend was being bothered by lust.”

“Desire isn’t lust though,” Will pointed out. “Or at least, desire doesn’t have to be. Desire demons often just give someone something that they want, whether it be sex or a hot meal.”

That made Jimmy jump up, “But common folk wouldn’t know that! Perhaps he thought that it would make the demon go away, whether or not lust was part of the equation.”

“The question is,” Jack began. “What does our Lost Dreamer desire?”

No one spoke for a second, and that’s when Will realized that Jack was staring at him. “What?” he asked.

“That has to be related to how our friend is choosing them or a way to stop him. What does he desire Will?”

“I’m not-!” Will stopped, trying to reign himself in. Jack didn’t understand how hard this was for him and didn’t understand that he couldn’t just pull everything out of thin air. Fuck it! Jack should know. “I’m not a diviner, Jack! Spirits don’t tell me the future or give clear answers and they’re already hard to interpret! Why don’t you ask him?”

“I’m asking you,” Jack said gruffly.

He remembered Hannibal’s words from earlier. “Or you could actually do your job and stop this guy!”

It went quiet. Out of the corner of his eye, Will saw Beverly, Brian, and Jimmy all try and make their way away from the scene. Were they leaving him out to dry like this? Was he actually being abandoned? Slowly, “I didn’t hear that,” replied Jack. He looked measuredly at Will, staring into his eyes. Anger was present, but it was quiet and under control. For now.

“No, you didn’t,” Will apologized. “I’m sorry.”

Jack walked away.

After the scene, Beverly came straight up to Will. For a moment, he thought she was just coming to ask him what happened, but apparently Jack yelled loud enough for everyone in the fucking area to know about it. Once she arrived, his friend got ahold of his arm in a

smooth grapple and dragged him off. Once they were a sufficient ways away, Beverly stopped and turned to him. The look on her face made him fear for his balls.

“What the fuck was that?” she growled out.

He looked down, already plainly chastised from Jack and now his friend was joining in. “Look, I already know that was out of line.”

“Out of line?” she nearly yelled. A couple of people glanced in their direction, but upon seeing a Seeker yelling at an elf, they went back to their business. Will was simultaneously pleased at not being bothered and slightly frustrated at the fact that the people here were so conditioned to ignore this sort of behavior directed at an elf. Ugh. Oh wait. Beverly was still talking.

“Look, I’m worried about you Will. I know that it’s been rough on you lately and that none of us are really doing well, but are you? You know you can talk to me.”

Was that true? It would be nice if that was true. “Do I seem like I need to talk to someone? Do I seem different?”

She deflated and that’s when he realized that he had burst her hope. Beverly didn’t think he was going to talk to her. “You’re a little different, Will. You’ve always been, but that’s not a bad thing. What it does mean is that sometimes it’s hard to tell when you need help or when you’re just experiencing life.”

Pride rose up inside him, standing tall and straightening his spine. “And how would I know if you needed help?” he spat, not liking where the conversation was going.

“I would tell you,” she said simply, without fanfare or bite. His pride fell again. His friend was really just trying to help.

“It’s hard for me to talk to people,” Will replied. “I’ve never really had anyone that would respond well to the kind of stuff that goes on in my head.”

“Fade does weird things,” she agreed.

“Does weird things, is weird things. I just happen to be a little more connected than most.”

A grin. “Because you are a weird thing.” They laughed and left arm in arm. He felt better. Not good, but definitely better.

Friendship was odd like that.

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Bella Crawford was visiting him again, radiant in white and black. The outfit was a gamble for the colors, as both were notoriously difficult to keep clean, but it had yet to be soiled. A quiet display of confidence and finesse for any noble that would cross her path. Hannibal had extreme respect for the woman and her confidence; she was not one to be trifled with. Still,

she may be an accomplished player of the Game, but he was a better part of a much deadlier one. With her sitting across from him, invited into his home, he had never felt more powerful.

“Has your husband begun to suspect? He must, after all it is his job to suss out liars,” Hannibal said, hoping to plant seeds of doubt and worry.

She smiled sadly. “I’m sure he does. He tried to figure out what it was, but has allowed me my privacy. For now.”

“You act like he’s betrayed you. Why do you act like he’s working against you more than her own body?” he nudged.

She shook her head, “I don’t feel betrayed by him. There’s just no point in being mad at a disease. It only wants to live.”

“By deciding to live, it will likely kill you,” Hannibal pointed out.

She breathed sharply through her nose. “It’s not a matter of what is likely. It will kill me. I’ve been assured of that. What I can do is find ways to live longer or more comfortably, if I were to wish to.”

“You don’t?” he questioned. It was an odd thing to say. Very few didn’t wish to live longer and fewer wished to live uncomfortably. He didn’t take Lady Crawford for an ascetic.

“It doesn’t feel real,” the ambassador clarified. “I am being killed every moment that I breathe, but I feel fine. Absolutely fine.”

“You will feel fine up until the very moment that you don’t.”

“I know,” came her assurance. “This isn’t the first time I’ve dealt with terminal disease. The beginning and occasionally the middle will change from time to time, but the ending is always the same.”

He felt the need to ask: “And withdrawing from Jack is your solution?”

“It’s already taken me away from him and everything else. I want to make it a clean break.”

“Oh Bella,” he sighed out. “There’s nothing about this that’s clean.”

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It had been nice to sleep in his own bed, especially since he hadn’t gotten much sleep in almost a month. As he laid, Will prayed as he hadn’t in months, wishing that the terror that he knew would await him in his sleep would be gone. His eyes closed, heavy and promising relief in dreams.

A halla stared into his face, raven feathers ruffling off its back. It turned and he followed. Hooves clicked against the stone that Will knew surrounded them. He felt trapped, almost unable to breath. A pressure forcing him to the ground, promising rest while it broke his bones. He glanced forward, beyond his guide, and saw a mirror, sconces with blue-green

light flickering on either side. The raven-halla moved out of the way and nudged him forward. The scruffy young elf stood in front of the mirror and peered in. The surface was opaque at first, before abruptly clearing.

There was nothing there. He didn't have a reflection, but the longer he stood the more he saw. Behind where he would have been standing stretched out a shadow, reaching down to the other end of the hall. It danced with the veilfire torches. Will needed to come in contact with his shadow. He reached out to touch and caught himself before he fell off.

The elf looked around, confused as to why he found himself balancing precariously on the edge of his thatched roof, one arm out-stretched. He quickly moved cautiously back, listening to his Mabari bark frantically under him, howling to wake him still. Careful movements allowed him to sit down and scoot off of the roof, back onto solid, safe ground.

They were getting worse.

After such an episode, Will thought it prudent to immediately make his way to the Comte. It was becoming a strange habit, but the man had yet to judge him and it was comforting. Never had he been able to just speak to someone before; even when he was back home among his people, there was always some reason that he needed to keep to himself. His elders and the Keeper were never pleased when he spoke of his encounters with the spirits, especially when they were positive. Anytime he spoke of the vividness of the Fade and his dreams, they were plagued by fear and the whole camp immediately moved, leading to his fellow children resenting him. Eventually, the child in him learned to stop.

"It must be so difficult for you to sleep, knowing what is waiting behind closed eyes to ambush you in your dreams."

Will huffed through his nose, "For me that is a little more literal than it is for others." He hadn't bothered to share the dream from the night before, still trying to make sense of it himself. Clearly something was trying to send him a message, but he wasn't sure whether it was a demon or a spirit. Until then, this would be kept to himself.

"It must be so strange," the Comte mused across from him. "None of us are really safe in dreams, but many of us have the luxury of forgetting. We won't be hunted by the demons attempting to prey on us or so we think. You, however, have never been safe nor are you allowed to forget. Why is it worse now?"

"It was never about safety," he felt the need to point out. "It is about predictability. I knew what to expect from my dreams. There were paths that were at least a little safer to walk as the demons were less inclined to bother you. I knew how to avoid certain demons and what spirits I could ask for advice. Now, I feel like I'm turned around, my compass and map tossed into the deepest chasm."

The two were currently traversing through the room, circling around desks and chairs. Will was rummaging through the shelves, attempting to find something scandalous on them. Earlier, he had found the latest copy of the *Randy Dowager Quarterly* , which left his Lordship shrugging and doing his attempt at a sheepish smile. Apparently this one was

reviewing a story called “Fifty Shades of Grey Warden”, something saucy about proving their worth to the order to join.

Will was currently trying to find said book, hoping to rub his Lordship’s nose in it. Maybe, he could also borrow it. Apparently it earned ‘four scarves fluttered in shock out of five’, which seemed like a good thing.

“You feel lost in your dreams. How is our Lost Dreamer proper managing?”

Will sighed, hand brushing against the *Maleficar Imperio* . “Poorly.”

“Is there a reason he kills the way that he does? How does he pick his victims?”

“We don’t know,” Will admitted. “Without any identifying features or some way to find out who these people were, we have nothing to link them together. What I can say is that when the demon is getting close, he feels compelled to kill to protect himself.”

His Lordship thought to ask: “Could the demon be influencing him?”

“No,” Will admitted. While the Comte did ask a good question, it was a moot one. “Demons can’t actually alter a person’s perception of reality unless the person is asleep or their mind is open to them. The paranoia could have been doing it though.”

The noble inched closer and was quiet. Then: “I believe that I don’t need to point out the obvious.”

“You’re seeing the similarities, too? I don’t think that I’m being haunted by a demon.” Probably.

A frown. “You are seeking peace in your sleep though and find yourself in danger somewhere you used to know how to navigate. The Lost Dreamer wants the same thing.”

Snorting, Will responded, “He’s going to be disappointed. A demon isn’t going to let him go, especially if it’s of Desire as I suspect. They cling to that kind of weakness.”

“He is experiencing only a small sample of what you do, but you have adapted to your struggle. An attempt at normalcy while this is your normal.” He stepped closer, almost to the point of touching Will. The elf tensed, attempting to show that the nearness did not bother him. “Will,” the Comte stated. “You do have a choice here. You don’t have to be ruled by what’s going on in your head, not like the Lost Dreamer.”

He was impossibly close and Will forced himself to relax. He nodded his head, but startled when he felt something brush the back of his head. It felt like a nose?

“Are you smelling me?” The man retreated before he could cause further insult.

Then began the excuses. “My apologies Will. I smelled a certain herb and was attempting to identify it.” This was just like a noble, especially an Orlesian one. Always forgetting that those not in their class were people and that they had lives, feelings, and dignity. Taking

advantage in such a manner would be just the beginning if he allowed the behavior to continue.

“I need to leave. Goodbye your Lordship,” retorted Will and he left. Such behavior was inexcusable. Surely there was somewhere else he needed to be.

“It took us a while,” began Brian after Will arrived. It had taken some time, but after wandering around town and ‘disturbing the peace’ (stupid humans and their stupid prejudices), Beverly sent him a message to return to the barracks. “We’ve found the Lost Dreamer. His name was Elliot Buddish; he was from Ferelden, but moved here after falling in love with an Orlesian woman. When the end of the rebellion occurred, they left for Orlais to avoid backlash. They have two kids and according to Emma, the family hasn’t seen him in four months. Apparently he had gotten terribly ill and then just left.”

“Emma?” Will asked.

“His wife,” clarified Jack. “We discovered them by looking for nearby families in the area that were missing people and she came forward. She is actually here now, in one of the other rooms.” Will had already confronted the Seeker earlier about not informing him about finding out about Buddish, but apparently they wanted to not bother him.

“Can I speak to her?”

Emma Buddish was beautiful in a way that age and experience showered a person. Once, she would have been stunning, perhaps it was better that she was in Ferelden during that time. Beautiful peasant girls in Orlais had a tendency to be taken advantage of by chevaliers and noblemen, who faced no repercussions due to status. She dressed simply, plainly, but was clearly in a state of mourning by her garb.

“Has he contacted you since he left?” Jack Crawford cut to the chase. The two men sat opposite the woman, and she kept glancing over at Will. Now, he realized, was probably the first time that she met an elf in this kind of position.

“He hasn’t. Also, I left him.” A brave woman as well. Women without husbands did not do well in small towns in Orlais. People were strange and suspicious. Granted, this wasn’t always the case. Hopefully, she found a town with people that would appreciate her.

“Why did you leave?” Jack asked, keeping control of the conversation.

“The illness.” She sighed. “I must sound absolutely horrible. I had quit my work at the inn to be with him and be there for him, but he wanted to be alone.” Will thought that Jack would interject here, but the Seeker remained silent.

“He made that clear. I tried to speak with him, but he kept pulling away. He became paranoid, and I was worried. I left with the kids. It was strange for them at first, but it was that or wait for him to blow up one day.” She stayed silent and Will waited for Jack to say something. A

quick glance at the man's face revealed him to be deep in thought, which left speaking to the distraught person across from them as the job for Will. Absolutely wonderful.

"You left before he became violent?"

"Don't doubt that he was angry," she replied. "Never hit us, but the worry was there. I thought that when he was weak enough, there would be no way that he could try. The children would finally be able to see him as the sick man he was. The process was slow though, and it was becoming more and more likely that he might become violent. His paranoia was getting worse; he started seeing monsters around every corner."

"Did his faith ever falter?" ventured Will.

She seemed shocked. "Elliot was never religious. Is that what he's doing? Is he trying to join the Seekers?"

While Will took a moment to try and parse out how he might broach the topic, Jack finally spoke. "Your husband is dying, Madame Buddish, and soon. His paranoia is clearly harming him and we hope to find him before he hurts himself or someone else." A little late for that, but Will kept his thoughts to himself.

"Is there anywhere he feels safe?"

She thought for a moment before answering. "We used to take walks in the Emerald Graves on a regular basis. There was a small pool where the water reflected the sunset in the most beautiful way and prophet's laurel grew all over the area. We would sometimes have picnics there and spend the day away from the kids."

The small pool in the Emerald Graves was beautiful. The light did reflect across the clear water to dance among the trees, the last rays of light pushing through the falling leaves and firs. Moss clung to the sides of them and this small piece of nature was an oasis, or it would have been.

A blanket was on the large rocks that bordered the pool and on it was whom Will could only assume was Elliot Buddish. The man was plain looking with black-brown hair and was spread out on the boulder, knife still in hand. He had been attempting to skin himself alive, but clearly died half-way through the process. It would have been painful. The blood had soaked through the blanket and dripped down into the little pool, each drop spreading it further and tainting the water. Will hoped they could move the body soon so that it wouldn't poison it further.

Jack stood beside him as the three other Seekers walked off. They were going to report their findings to the Red Crossing guard and try to break the news to Emma Buddish. Vaguely, Will wondered if they should lie to give the woman some peace. He didn't know if that would be a good or a bad thing.

Seeker Crawford sighed, annoyed at another life lost. “This will be the last one,” Will stated the obvious.

“Must have died part way through the process. I wonder if the demon was here for it, if it was ever there to begin with.”

The mage bowed his head. “He died in a way of his choosing, not possessed and not having hurt his family. The Maker’s disease didn’t have a chance to take him either.”

Jack sniffed. “His choice?”

So Will shrugged. “As much as he could make one anyway. I’ll bet that if there was a demon involved, and it was a desire demon, it was trying to tempt him with the life he wanted: disease-free and happy with his family. Messere Buddish knew that whatever he was granted would be false and eventually broke the deal, if he even made it in the first place.”

“What about you, Will?” questioned his boss. The man was careful not to crowd him, but Will still felt claustrophobic. “Are you feeling like you don’t have a choice?”

“It’s hard, Jack.” He needed to explain this, “It’s getting harder. I understand that I need your help as much as you need mine, but I don’t know how much longer I will be able to keep up with the rest of you.”

“You caught the last three. If we support you, you’ll be able to catch many more.”

Will looked at the sad man, spread out on the rock where he begged for death. “Not this one.”

Jack snarled, “I’m used to this from my wife by now, but I don’t need it from you. Speak plainly.”

He wasn’t going to like this. “This whole thing is becoming more difficult to do. I’m not used to putting myself in the Fade this fast and this often. I’m worried that I won’t be able to give you what you want one day and then I’ll find myself being carted off to the Circle. That’s not the life I want.”

Jack argued, “You’re not doing this alone. You have the rest of us with you.”

“And you’ll join me in the Fade, walking among the spirits and demons?” Jack didn’t answer. “You can’t Jack. You really can’t. I have to walk there alone.”

“And what about support? We need you Will; you know what will happen if you’re not here.”

The men circled each other without moving. “If I’m not careful, Jack, I won’t be here regardless.”

“Is that a threat?” Will laughed humorlessly. “No, it’s a promise.”

Jack pondered the corpse between them for the moment and his next question hung in the air, ready and waiting to be answered. Eventually he realized that Will wouldn’t approach it first. “Look. I’m not going to tell you what to do-” That’s exactly what he was doing. “But if you

leave, I can't protect you anymore. Any attempt by myself to stop people from finding you would just end with me losing my position and you any protection at all. On top of this, you would have to live with the knowledge that more killing would happen, more that you could have prevented."

Will snapped, "Killing is going to happen anyway. That's the way the world works."

Jack shook his head. "If you want to run, run. I'm not going to stop you," he said and left Will alone. There was no one else around, no one watching him. No one would stop him… he could leave. Now.

In front of him, the dust parted and Elliot Buddish sat up from the rock. Blood dripped continuously from his wrists, even as his limbs were waning. "You see it too," he whispered, voice unnaturally loud for its raspiness. "It's inside of you, and it won't come out."

"What is inside of me?" Will breathed. A shriveled and decaying hand reached for his face. "It won't let you go." The skinned arm brushed his shoulder and the warm feeling trailed down his arm. He looked down, but there was nothing there. Back up, and Elliot Buddish was back where he belonged, dead and drying out. A phantom and nothing more.

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After everything that had happened with Elliot Buddish, Jack knew that he needed to be with his wife. Dying and the dead were usually all the same, but she was the love of his life. He didn't want her to be alone. The servants of the Lecter estate were used to him by now, allowing him in with little resistance. Jack barrelled up to the study and sharply rapped on the door. Four quick knocks.

The door opened slowly and quietly to the face of the man that could potentially facilitate the reparation of their marriage or its destruction. "Hello Seeker Crawford."

His wife was sitting on a lounge in the study that was currently being blocked by Comte Lecter. "Jack," Bella whispered out, scarcely believing that he was before her.

He bowed his head respectfully to their host. "Comte Lecter; would it be at all possible for my wife and I to borrow your study? It should only take a moment." His Lordship glanced back to Bella and the resigned but happier than resigned look on her face. She nodded and his Lordship returned his gaze. "Not at all, Jack. Take all of the time that you need."

His wife scowled and held her ground as her husband entered the space. "Were you visiting his Lordship for official reasons or did you just follow me here?"

He tried to give her a respectful distance away, but fought his instincts that told him to go to her. It was important that she felt comfortable with the magnitude of the conversation that he was approaching. "One of the servants at the guest house informed me that you were here after I asked. I think I already knew though, or at least suspected. Suppose you could consider this following you."

“You know?” she asked, voice trembling and low. He nodded and she laughed bitterly, “Of course you know.”

“When did you?” he asked.

She clutched her cloak in her hands, knuckles paling from the strain. “Before I left Starkhaven; I had it confirmed while on the seas. There was a healer on board.”

“You’ve always had a hearty constitution.”

“It’s in my lungs, Jack. There’s not much medicine can do about that.”

He sunk into one of the chairs. “We’ve always been so cautious around disease. Ever since your mother died, we have been exceedingly careful.”

She remained standing, proud as ever. He felt so surprised; she looked strong and regal, not like she was sick. He looked a little closer and found evidence of lack of sleep, but not much else. “If there was a healer on board, why aren’t you better?”

“It’s fatal, Jack. There’s not much anyone can do.”

He sighed and felt his heart begin breaking. The love of his life… gone? A pain so physical that it could only be grief in the world. Is that how Will felt spirits? Jack didn’t know. “When were you going to tell me?”

Looking him in the eyes, Bella replied, “Perhaps sometime in the future, perhaps never. Whenever, if even then, I was going to tell you, it was far enough away that I’m not ready to speak on it now.”

Inhale. Exhale. “We’re speaking about it now. Have you been seeing a healer since you found out?”

“I have,” his wife said. “I’m about to stop.”

“Do I have any say?” he began.

She stopped him before he could continue. “No. You don’t.”

The windows weren’t open and a fire had been carefully maintained, but there was a chill regardless. The thought sunk through his brain until it settled in the quiet places. His wife was dying; there was nothing he could do. She didn’t want him to do anything, say anything. Flashes of Elliot Buddish entered his brain and he wondered about what she desired. Will was there too, another person he couldn’t help in the way that he wanted to. “Do you want to be alone?” he asked. She didn’t answer and he didn’t want her to. “You don’t have to say it now. I just want you to think about it.” She looked away for a moment, and he could see the glistening of the fire from the wet tears trailing down her cheeks. Otherwise, she looked completely composed. “I don’t want you to be alone, Bella. Not now and not ever.”

Exhaling sharply through the nose, her blank face became a smile. It wasn’t a happy one. “We fight this battle together?”

Jack knew what she meant by those words and he knew he needed to be honest. “I wish I could help, but this is your war. I’ll be your support ‘til the end; I promise I’m not going anywhere.” The smile on her face became less brittle and bitter.

“You’ve never been the best at comfort. I know you feel you need to be that, but I can’t let you right now. I do appreciate it.”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about what I need.” The husband got up and moved across the room to his wife, trying to keep them going. He brought her into his arms, and she joined him. The embrace wasn’t long, but if gave them both a strength they had forgotten that they needed. The two backed away, but remained holding each other. “Why wouldn’t you tell me?” he asked her. She looked into his eyes, sad but strong.

“I thought our lives wouldn’t change. If I didn’t say anything, it wouldn’t be real.”

“But you changed,” Jack concluded. She nodded.

“I didn’t anticipate it happening as much as it did.”

They remained holding each other until it wasn’t too painful to let go. They were both still very busy people, with duties outside of each other. The husband and wife were very aware of this. When they were finally ready, both thanked Comte Lecter and apologized for imposing in his home, which he didn’t seem to mind. The couple went their separate ways for the moment, knowing they would reunite that night.

It still bothered Jack. How could he let his wife go?

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The lot of them had been attempting to find some sort of normalcy after the events with Elliot Buddish, cleaning up after the body and generally sending messages back to headquarters. Will was mostly there just to support Beverly, who seemed to have it in her head that he was eventually going to be a full-fledged Seeker. He decided to neglect mentioning the fact that there had never been a mage Seeker of Truth.

Other than his mere presence at Beverly’s request, there was no reason for Will to be here. Will knew that he wasn’t the only one suffering through all of this, but he could handle it. Jack, on the other hand, was not doing as well. He had come back from a ‘meeting’ (that he had not told anyone else about) and had seemed to be hurting more than usual. It had been happening ever since they met with Madame Buddish about her husband and was beginning to manifest around the man in a tangible sense. Perhaps he was needed elsewhere; Beverly could wait.

Will said a quick farewell to Beverly, Brian, and Jimmy before proceeding to the Guard-Captain’s office. Said officer had vacated the area and Jack was currently sitting at the desk, fingers steepled and tension stretching his body.

“Jack?” Will asked but didn’t receive any real response. The Seeker in question simply shifted in his seat and continued to stare at the wall. The elven man scooted a chair closer to

the desk and sat down across from him. “Jack?” A vague nod.

He sighed. There was only one way to approach this. Once upon a time, Jack had used the same words to show support to him; it was now time to make sure that Will showed his own.

“I’m going to sit here until you’re ready to talk. You don’t have to say a word until you’re ready, but I’m not leaving until you do.”

They were both silent for a long time, but eventually Jack began to speak.

Chapter End Notes

Andaran atish'an: Formal elven greeting; Enter this place in peace.
>Andaran (variant): Version of previous used in Alienages by non-Dalish elves.
Dareth shiral: Farewell, Safe Journey
>Shiral (variant) Version of previous used in Alienages by non-Dalish elves
Hahren: Elder, both the word and the title
Venhedis lasa; A common curse, meaning unknown
Vhenadhal: Tree of the People, a common centerpiece to Alienages as a way to celebrate elven culture

Halam'shivanas

Chapter Summary

High Seeker Frederick Chilton calls Seeker Jack Crawford and the squad to the Bastien d'Argent with news about a killer that has long eluded them. Will suspects something fishy and Jack mourns two losses.

Chapter Notes

08/31/24: Not yet edited

I'm so sorry about how late this chapter is. It's been an interesting couple of two weeks and that put me behind in editing and writing for other chapters. I also have been running a Chronicles of Darkness campaign at home and have been doing research on Horrors for that game. I also have been studying for the GRE.

I've been spending a lot of time on my computer.

Anyway, I thought I'd do a little accent thing. So, in Thedas, the people in certain areas have very different accents depending on nationality, upbringing, etc. For funsies, here are the accents our main cast should have:

Hannibal: Actually the same. Hannibal's accent in the show is a bit of a mix of different accents (as well as Mads Mikkelsen's), so he gets to keep.

Will: A bit of Hugh Dancy's natural accent mixed with the more lyrical parts of Welsh.

Jack and Bella: Would sound British with a slight Spanish flair thing going.

Abigail, Beverly, Brian, Freddie, Alana, Frederick, and Abel: French. Very French. The first two would sound a bit rougher though, less lyrical maybe?

Jimmy: Americanized French. Not an American doing a bad French accent. More like a French person that has been in the U.S. long enough to pick up some patterns. That or Canadian, take your pick.

Anyway, enjoy!

Halam'shivanas: The sweet sacrifice of duty.

Two days of peace. That was how long Will managed to go without being bothered by the Seekers again. He worked with Eloise in the apothecary for some of it for the extra coin and spent time at the house with Beverly and Abigail. All of it managed to help him put the strange creature out of his mind and allow him to get some rest. Well, rest for him anyway, which was about four hours of sleep.

Speaking with Abigail had become increasingly awkward. Both nights he had more sleep-walking episodes, and Will was starting to become worried that he might actually be dealing with demons. Buddish's warnings cut through his skull every time he woke up somewhere other than his bed. If that was true, it was vital that Abigail stay away from him; she already had one person in her life try and kill her, she didn't need another.

Beverly was the one that informed him about their new mission. It was a six day journey to the Bastion d'Argent, apparently a mission from the higher ups of vital importance; the Lord Seeker Prurnell had requested him specifically. And thus, another reason he should have left when Jack gave him the chance, but the man needed him now more than ever. His wife was dying and a lack of support would only make the whole situation that much worse.

The whole party left fairly early in the morning; it wasn't even light out yet. Will had left his rent out for his subletter and a message for Alana, Abigail, and Comte Lecter since he wasn't able to notify any of them about leaving (and he needed someone to agree to watch his Mabari). They arrived six days later at the Seeker Fortress near dusk, at just the right time for Will to work his literal magic.

The Bastion d'Argent was a training facility for the Seekers of Truth, one of the only ones left in Thedas. Apparently, it was relatively new, considering that most of them (including the most infamous one Therinfal Redoubt) were financially unsound and had to be shut down. The Bastion was an attempt by the Seekers to slowly begin training themselves separately from the Templars again, so that they could keep a tighter hold on their secrets. The fact that Will, a Dalish mage, was being invited to a place that most people didn't know existed, let alone know where, meant that whatever happened, it was high profile.

Well, most people **had not** known about the fortress. The Red Tattler took care of that pesky little gnat.

"So you're telling me that I'm supposed to figure out if what Freddie Lounds said is actually true," Will asked. He wasn't very pleased about the fact that the ginger bard had enough sway in the Game that an important person took her ramblings seriously. Furthermore, it was annoying that Lord Seeker Prurnell cared enough to have him sent to check up on it. Or knew who he was.

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and sighed. Vaguely, the man reminded him of Keeper Istimaethoriel. "See it this way; you're looking at it for me, not Lord Seeker Prurnell or Freddie Lounds," the larger man urged. Well, when he put it that way. Will still wasn't happy, but the man himself cared enough to ask.

Looming, the Bastion d'Argent was the picture of foreboding as the sun was setting. Its light caught on the mortar and slabs of rock and brick that jutted out and extended to the sky. The fortress was set in separated rings and each one went one more level higher the further inward it went. Bridges extended between roofs and alcoves with doorways for walkways over the paths beneath. The walls and defensible position planning made it so this place would be handy during a siege; if they ever needed to retreat, they simply had to cut off contact with the infected ring and pull back one. Everything was grey and dour, the heraldry of the Seekers of Truth and the sunburst representing the Divine were everywhere.

Will bumped Jack slightly as they approached the gates and whispered, "I'm a little nervous. You said Lord Seeker Prurnell was the one that requested me here? What if they grab me and take me to a Circle or put me through the Rite of Tranquility." Jack wasn't responding. "What if they don't let me leave?"

Jack patted his back. "I promised that while you worked for me, I could protect you. I won't leave you here, Will, you have my word."

Will muttered, "Not today," but approached the gates regardless. He received some side-eye from Jack. It must truly have been something if he could see it for once; Beverly told him that he side-eyed them all most of the time when he was exasperated, but it was usually when they weren't looking at him.

The gates opened and on the other side stood a man in Seeker Armor, not dragon bone like Jack's, but possibly silverite with how it gleamed. He had coiffed black hair and a small, but full beard that framed beady green eyes. The new Seeker lacked a certain musculature that Will had seen on others, but there was something off about him that made Will extremely uncomfortable.

"Wonderful! It is just wonderful to have you here Senior Seeker Crawford. And I am happy to also welcome our friend Monsieur Will. Lord Seeker Prurnell informed me of your visit and its reason," the man exclaimed as they approached. Once they got closer, he introduced himself: "I am High Seeker Frederick Chilton and it is my job to run the Bastion d'Argent." High Seeker Chilton turned on his heel and began a lengthy explanation about his job in the Bastion. "High Seeker?" whispered Will to Jack.

Jack leaned back to him, "It's because of his position here at the Bastion. It's his job to oversee the training of new recruits."

Will paled. This man was in charge of the next generation of Seekers? He voiced his concern to Jack as the subject of their gossip continued self-aggrandizing. Jack simply shook his head and motioned for him to pay attention. "High Seeker?" he asked, wavering between amused surprise and anxiety.

"Don't worry," assured Jack. "He may outrank me, but I won't let him take you." It… did more to help than Jack probably realized. With the rest of the crew behind them (they were on their way after getting the horses settled), they could probably take High Seeker Chilton in a fight.

The man was still waving his arms around, talking about a new recruit that said he had helped her achieve her life's endeavor…

Definitely could take him in a fight.

"High Seeker," Jack interrupted. The man paused and turned to look at the both of them. "We thank you for your hospitality, but our work is of vital importance. We do not wish for the Sunburst Throne and company to be kept waiting?"

"Of course," the High Seeker replied. For the sweeping that followed, he should have been wearing a cape. It would have been much more impressive. Suddenly, they were being led to the center of the fortress and down, much further than Will was expecting. It was like they hit a wall of silence, the casual noises of birds and sword training, the low murmurs of voices and calls for dinner and ale, it all disappeared. The hollow chill of empty halls filled the ears until it was almost louder than his heart. "Senior Seeker, you remember Abel Gideon," Chilton began.

"How could I forget?" replied Jack and he turned to Will. "Gideon was a former Seeker himself. Had been with the order for a decade or more before one day he just went off. He killed many mages and Templars using his Seeker abilities and a bunch of us had to be brought in to restrain him before he made his way through the Circle. He was screaming nonsense the whole time that they took him away."

"Away?" asked Will.

"To the Sea of Ashes. When a Seeker breaks their duty, they are sent there to wander until they die."

"That's awful-"

"And not the case here," Chilton interrupted. "After Gideon, I was instructed by Lady Seeker Prurnell to begin working on a pet project, nothing that is relevant right now, and he was to be my real trial. However, while working on it, I discovered that he may have had another secret that he was keeping from us the entire time." They stood in front of a door and Chilton waited until he finished to open it.

"That our dear Gideon was always a murderer. He was the Highwayman."

The room smelled of rotting meat and flies, surely rats must have gotten in and carried off bits and pieces of the young woman that was propped up in the middle. She was skewered with a spear and her entire body was run through with blades of varying sizes (and a couple of arrows). The reason why became more obvious when Will realized that they were in the armory. Anything not stabbed in the young woman was scattered around alongside pieces of armor emblazoned with the symbol of the Seekers of Truth. "The woman I spoke of earlier. Shame to see the end of so much potential, especially in one so young." Her rotted and hollowed out corpse hung limply in the center, pinned to the floor. Clearly her body had been shut up in the room for the full week that the Bastion had to wait, with no preservation charm or non-magical way to keep out the stench.

“We’re not entirely sure how he got in here. In response, we’ve put him further down in an area where escape will guarantee death. I’ve been informed that I am not to exact any judgment until we have gotten an official opinion on the subject.” He glanced over at Will. “I suppose this counts.”

“I’ll have to sleep here,” said Will. There was so much going on in the area that it was nearly impossible to concentrate on one particular thing. He tried not to think about spending the night in a room with a corpse.

“Sleep here?” gasped out Chilton.

Jack glared, “We told you about Monsieur Will prior to arriving. You know very well what he needs to do to help.”

“I don’t feel comfortable leaving him alone with a corpse.”

“I’m not a necromancer,” replied Will. “And I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t talk about me like I’m not here.”

“No, you’re not a necromancer. You’re a somniari!” Will shrunk into himself. “Honestly, I thought they were myths. From what I’ve heard, most of them die extraordinarily young. What a wonder to behold!”

“High Seeker. We have a job to do and then Will shall be leaving with me.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t,” retorted the High Seeker. “Dreamers are essentially legends. To have one among us could give us the key to helping mages and templars alike. Imagine what would happen if we could save the ultimate attractor to demons.”

Putting an arm protectively around Will’s shoulder, Jack continued, “He is part of my team and helping people. There are much more important and immediate things for him to take care of.”

“Perhaps.” A concession. “But another visit later couldn’t hurt?” Chilton continued. As the two Seekers walked away, he stepped in close to whisper at Will, “Let me know when you think you could make a special visit. Would be wonderful if we could work together to create a world where mages are equals and not to be feared.” He moved away and Will didn’t feel very clean.

Quiet. So quiet. She stood in front of him preparing for the day, but she had no idea that he was there. Honestly, under Chilton’s tender care, the training of Seekers has gone downhill. What happened to ‘always be vigilant’? He was doing this one a favor, she wouldn’t last in a Circle.

He waited until she got close… Good, she hasn’t donned armor yet. One. Two. Three.

He leapt, smacking her in the throat with a shield to prevent her from screaming and to knock her over. Crouching down over her, he took the most useless part of her, the eyes. How was

she supposed to remain vigilant if she couldn't even see with them?

She didn't need them. Right?

The room was a beautiful place for him to work with this canvas, all of these lovely sharp things. So perfect, so deadly.

"So," he whispered to her, like it was a secret. Like they were going to sneak into the kitchen for teacakes. She struggled under him on the ground, attempting to move away. Poor thing.

"What should go first?"

The next morning was a rough one. Will still felt sticky and wrong from everything that had happened. What made it worse, was the alien feeling under his skin that had never been present before. It was like he was too small and too big for his insides. The elf only hoped that whatever the feeling was, it would go away before he had to spend too much time with anyone.

Will wasn't the only one to dream that night, but Jack Crawford's were less bound by the walls of truth and reality than normal. His, similarly to Will's, were colored by perspective and lost memories of something he had tried not to think about for a long time.

Once, there was a young woman. She was blonde, pretty, and driven unlike other young women her age. She could have gone anywhere, probably done anything, but instead chose to devote her life to the Maker and serving all of His children. A simple life in the Chantry wouldn't do however, she was a woman of action. When this young woman heard about the new Seeker training facility, she begged to be allowed to attend.

Her name was Miriam Lass.

Miriam rose through the ranks of other trainees, but had yet to be approved to go through her Vigil. After all, she had only been training for a year or so; it was not appropriate for her to be promoted that quickly. Jack Crawford, at the time, had been a Senior Seeker for a while and was in the running to be promoted to High Seeker of the region, but he knew that if he wanted that position, he would need to go after the worst of the worst: the Highwayman. He was a murderer like no other and all of his murders had a staged, almost ritualistic nature to them. There was no way that half of them were even possible, so the Lady Seeker and Knight Vigilant were convinced the Highwayman was a mage, even if they found no evidence of magic at the crime scenes.

Lack of evidence didn't mean much when the Court decided to get involved. Empress Celene I was a shrewd woman that valued forethought before leaping into battle, but even she was becoming impatient.

So, Jack called in Miriam Lass. The rest of his party were busy with the recruits and they had a recent victim in Verchiel that was perfect for him to work off of. Hopefully, if the two of them worked together the Highwayman could be caught. This kind of success would make him High Seeker and put her through her Vigil.

“Monsieur” she had asked, standing hesitantly in the doorway of his study. His invitation had only come that morning and said nothing of his plan; this was meant to be between the two of them.

“Madame Lass, please come in,” he greeted from the desk. Back then he had a stationary position at the Bastion. He and Bella had appreciated that immensely at the time, but Jack would later recognize that much of his behavior reflected restlessness. “Sorry to pull you away from your training session. Please don’t be anxious, you’ve done nothing wrong,” Jack continued as she sat down.

“I’m not anxious. Curious,” Miriam replied. Her voice and fingers betrayed her though. Some anxiety, some nervousness, was still very present. She fiddled with a locket around neck idly.

“Your instructors tell me that you believe you’re ready for the Vigil.”

“I am ready for the Vigil,” she butted in and he gave her a look.

“Our instructors are meant to show us our limits at this stage; if they say you’re not ready, then you are not. There may be an opportunity, however, to prove that you are.”

The Seeker-in-Training shifted forward, clearly interested beyond reasonable doubt. “Seeker Crawford?”

He dropped the grenade. “Are you familiar with the Highwayman?”

Miriam nodded, “Yes, Seeker. He’s the murderer that travels up and down the Imperial Highway.”

“Yes, and he’s just done two of his three victims for this run.”

Sitting back, she stared at him in wonder. “There’s just one more.”

“One more chance to find him before he disappears for who knows how long.”

They met with High Seeker Chilton in a small conference room. The table was a sturdy wood, perhaps oak, and had a long depression in the middle with clasps along it. Shelves of books concerning law, history, geography, and arcane lore surrounded everything but the door and on some of the shelves Will spotted small figures hiding between book bindings.

At another time, this would have been a war room.

The High Seeker was kicking back in an overly fancy chair, feet resting in the depression, when they arrived, breakfast in hand. He had wanted to meet them as soon as they were able, his own empty plate was to the side of his boots.

Pleasantries were spoken for a few moments, but eventually Will had to interrupt.

“You claim that Gideon is the Highwayman, but he hasn’t been active in two years. When was Gideon admitted?”

Jack shot him a look; Will had some trouble actually deciphering what it meant, but his best guest was somewhere between ‘Not now, Will!’ and ‘Really?’ “Almost two years ago,” the man replied.

“From what I’ve gathered,” Will began practically spitting at Chilton. He had only met the man twice and only for short periods of time, but he was already bothered by him immensely. “The Highwayman is brutal, but methodical. He is rarely impulsive, it’s what made him so difficult to catch. Does the sudden mass murder of a Circle sound methodical to you?”

High Seeker Chilton smirked. “ **Was** so hard to catch. Will you be speaking with him together or separately?”

“Separately,” confirmed Jack. “Need to make sure that the information checks out for both of us.”

“You’ve spoken with him before.”

“Of course,” assured Jack. “We all did back when the man had been caught. Everybody wanted to know how such a well-regarded Seeker went so bad.”

“Your notes were more or less helpful as I did my own work trying to assess his mental state over the past couple of years.” Ah, the little man was posturing. Will was already tired of his routine; he was a fake.

The elf was sure that somewhere was someone that he could perhaps be cordial with, but this Chilton was not it. He was so sure of himself, almost to a fault.

“I’m glad I was helpful,” replied Jack. It was clear that the man had some insecurities that he was playing up the act for. Normally, that might be endearing, but there was something else.

“More or less,” snorted Will, and he delighted at the affronted reaction he was given.

There was something very wrong with High Seeker Chilton. It sat just beneath the surface, felt green and grabbing. Greed? Worse, but he wasn’t sure what.

“I’ll go first,” said Jack and the man turned his beady-green eyes onto Will. It creeped him out.

“It’ll give us a chance to chat.”

“I’ll wait outside,” Will said at almost the exact same time. “I need some air.”

He needed to explore without Chilton watching. Maybe he could figure out what was going on.

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Dank, dark, and dull the further down he went. Where higher up, the halls had some decorations, these were bare even of sconces. There were holders for torchlight, but most of

them were empty, only an actual light source about every fifty feet. Night in the middle of the day. Two years must have felt like a lifetime.

Finally he arrived at the man's cell, an iron door blocked any view of him, except for a window about a foot wide and half a foot tall sitting at eye level. Jack unlatched it to peer inside where Abel Gideon was standing in the exact center of an empty room behind a set of iron bars. There was a reaction to see him waiting, but it wasn't shock or surprise. Rather, it was the absence: an expectation of a feeling that didn't come. Carefully, he set the emotion aside for a more appropriate time to engage with it. After a moment to collect himself, Jack threw open the door.

It was strange, seeing one of his former comrades again, especially in such conditions. When they had met briefly the first time, prior to Gideon's massacre at the Circle in Montsimmard, Jack Crawford had thought he was a respectable man, if a bit high-strung. The man before him now was as far from respectable one could get, but there was the oddest sense that he had mellowed out in the two and a half years since the Senior Seeker had met him. There was a subtle stillness in the way he carried himself, something about it foreign enough that Jack almost wondered if he should get someone to check Gideon's body for possession, even though he knew better.

Seekers couldn't be possessed by demons, but that didn't mean they couldn't make deals with them. Perhaps that should be what they looked for?

"Abel Gideon, I don't know if you-"

"Wonderful to see you again, Seeker Crawford." Gideon tilted his head like a crow, a carrion bird, waiting to peck at soft flesh.

"You remembered," Jack responded, unfazed.

A smile. "Of course! I haven't had many visitors over the years, so even the slightest new one is a welcomed and remarkable encounter. A memorable encounter, too. Most of my contact with the outside world consists of Frederick Chilton and a fan or a few sending me messages."

Jack nodded. "I will do my best to not waste your time now that I have it."

Gideon hummed. "Well that's not entirely true." He paused. "Not that I don't enjoy the company. It's simply that there's no point to the questioning. Nobody needs to ask who I did it. I did. Was caught with the weapon and all."

He raised an eyebrow, hoping it fed back some of the slight disdain he was receiving. "You also claim to be the Highwayman and that this is you reclaiming your title."

A shrug. "Don't like being called the Highwayman. Never liked it. Feels like someone trying to create a ghost story. While I enjoy ghost stories, I don't like being treated as something children tell to frighten and dare each other."

An interesting line of thinking, but not what Jack came here for. He needed to know, to see, whether or not Abel Gideon was who he claimed to be. Peace would not come with just claims, he needed to know it beyond reasonable doubt. “Is that why you never claimed any of the murders until now.”

Gideon smiled, all teeth and no lips. “Just watching the show from the best seats in the house.”

“Two years of watching backstage without getting a chance to participate. Must have grown boring.”

The smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Here we are.”

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This was such a dumb idea. So unbelievably stupid. What in the Void did he think he was going to accomplish by **sneaking** around a highly guarded super-Templar training facility? These people were called the Seekers of Truth, hiding from them was absolutely the worst possible thing he could think of.

That did not change the fact that he was doing it anyway.

The first thing that he did was walk the perimeter and try to find a window back into the office. A couple of Seekers were walking behind him at the behest of the High Seeker, but clearly they were not interested in their task. He moved a few things around subtly so that his watchful guards wouldn’t notice, but it would probably cause a fight in a few moments. A quick distraction and the suggestion of something more important later would get them to leave without bothering Will. Unfortunately he also would have to waste time meditating around trees to get them to become bored enough to leave. A courtyard clearly meant for more peaceful moments in a Seeker’s day was the spot he chose and it was actually very close to the office. It would only take a ten second sprint to get over there.

After the fight started and they were gone, he scouted out the window and picked his way in. From the fight going on outside, he had about ten minutes before he needed to go back. Apparently, Chilton was still busy watching Crawford, so the room was abandoned. He searched the room, bookshelves, drawers, even poked a few odd looking bricks, but nothing was standing out.

Three minutes gone.

Then he noticed it: a false bottom. It was in one of the bottom drawers at the High Seeker’s desk. It took some maneuvering, but he found the mechanism that allowed him to access it. Under the wood, Will found paper. A blue-backed journal held studies of Qunari Ben-Hasserath and what their roles were among the Qun. There were notes on Tranquility and the ramifications of it on mages, both those made Tranquil and the people around them. Something about dissention and there were detailed explanations of potions and “education” techniques.

There went three more minutes. Four minutes left.

Will grabbed his own journal and charcoal and took hasty, messy notes on the content of the secret compartment. He had a few guesses about what the High Seeker was doing down there, but he was ultimately better off if he spent more time actually reading it later. It was a trace where he simply took small notes and the words became symbols instead of letters. A drawing with no meaning.

He only had one more minute left. Quickly, he placed everything back into the drawer and replaced the false bottom. A quick glance around the room showed nothing else out of place. The elf went back through the window and gave up on attempting to relock it after a moment. He didn't have time.

Just barely, Will managed to get back under some trees in the courtyard, put his stuff down, and regain enough of a sense of calm that the Seekers returning wouldn't find him suspicious. They didn't.

When he rejoined Jack, the Seeker didn't look pleased. In fact, he looked pensive, annoyed, irritated, and a few other words with less pleasant names. The High Seeker went on and on about his prize and Will started to wonder what **would** happen if he ever took the man up on the offer and visited. Probably something similar to what was happening to Gideon. He handed his stuff off to Jack as he entered; Chilton had ordered for his belongings to remain outside of the cell block, but Will wasn't going to give the High Seeker the satisfaction of handling his bag. Once that was taken care of, Will was off to see Gideon.

The man himself was nothing special. He was plain looking, slightly older, and had hints that he once had a muscular physique and luscious hair, but that was clearly a long time ago. Now he was balding and his muscle was practically gone. He had a slight goatee that couldn't decide if it was scraggly or well-trimmed and two pale eyes, devoid of color.

They stared at him as the human relaxed against the bars.

"Another visitor. How delicious. Now you I haven't met."

He bowed his head slightly, hoping to get a positive reaction. The man reclining straightened slightly and smiled. "My name is Will, I'm working with the Seekers of Truth."

When he looked up, Will noticed that the man was staring at his ears. "An elf? Working **with** humans? Now that's rather strange."

Will shrugged. "It depends on your definition of 'working' and 'with'." He received a knowing nod.

"Right. Right. Now, why would they send you in?" Will abruptly remembered that he had been asked to leave his behind his staff. Would it be safer or not for him to reveal his status as a mage? Saying that he was a 'prospective Seeker' was just a terrible idea. Non-humans were not normally allowed positions in the Chantry (Beverly and Jimmy being the exceptions), they wouldn't be allowed to have them here. He decided to avoid the topic entirely.

"What effect were you hoping to have by killing Lisette Chasse?"

Gideon paused for a moment. “That was her name?” He stared at the ceiling, moving his colorless eyes away. It was a relief to not have them on him. The man felt out of place. Lost and wrong. “The effect I was hoping for was her death.” They returned.

“We’re almost positive that brutalization of the Highwayman’s bodies occurred during their deaths, not after.”

He snarled. “I don’t need to convince you that I’m the Highwayman.”

It suddenly fit together. The Ben-Hassrath research, learning about Tranquility, the potions, the strange techniques that looked like torture all came together in one fell swoop. “Someone needs you to.”

He couldn’t say anything yet, not until he knew.

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The ride back to Red Crossing was a long one. Less than twenty-four hours of being at the Seeker training facility gave much for the group to think about. There were dire implications if a Seeker of Truth was able to go that long as a murderer without anyone noticing. If the Order was that fragile, there was a chance that the court would pressure the Divine into disbanding the order, which would cause problems with the Templars and would mean reworking the Nevarran Accords.

Jimmy had been asking questions the whole ride back, “Are we sure that it’s possible? I’m sure if we looked we’d be able to find documentation that puts Gideon at different places than the Highwayman murders somewhere.”

“The problem is that any documentation that exists would be Seeker documentation,” Jack felt the need to clarify. He was the one that made sure to let the others know about the importance of this murder. “No one would trust it, even if it showed definitive proof to the contrary.”

“But!” Beverly interjected. “Gideon’s prior kills looked nothing like what he just did or any of the Highwayman’s murders. It’s like his whole method changed completely. During the Montsimmard Massacre, Gideon attacked no servants or Chantry sisters, just mages and Templars. The Highwayman killed anyone, regardless of status, career, creed, etc. Their only similarities were that all of the bodies were found along the Imperial Highway, either in a city along it or on the Highway itself and the staged artistic nature of the murders.” Moments like these were what made Jack proud of his troupe. They did good work and always managed to find ways around problems.

There was always something though. “While we can put that before the Court, we do need a better reason for him not to be. By better, I mean ‘juicier’. Say what you will about the Court itself, but sometimes evidence doesn’t go a long way when it suits them.”

“Are we sure he isn’t though?” asked Brian, his resident skeptic. Leave it to him to play demon’s advocate. It was helpful most of the time, but right now Jack didn’t want to hear it. He didn’t discourage it, however. If he did, that would only prevent Brian from speaking out

when it might actually be helpful. “I checked the traces we did of the last Highwayman victim, and the wound patterns are the exact same.”

That gutted him more than anything. “We didn’t find the last Highwayman victim.”

Brian started and had the wherewithal to look guilty. “The one before that I meant.” He looked down. “Sorry, Seeker.” Jack waved him off.

“From the way you have described the Highwayman, he should have a very specific kind of feel, but none of the spirits around me gave off any of that,” Will commented, peaking Jack’s attention. Jack had noticed that Will didn’t speak much the entirety of their trip back. He seemed to be thinking something over, mulling it around in his brain.

“We never made any of the wound patterns or the traces public,” Jack explained, hoping that maybe Will could contradict him. “There would be no way for him to know about them.”

Will shrugged instead. “Maybe he is our Highwayman, maybe not. If he isn’t, I doubt the Highwayman stopped due to death, that doesn’t feel right. Our real murderer is going to make sure that everyone knows it.”

That kind of thing worried him more than anything else.

Will’s words were still ringing in his head all the way to the Lecter estate. He wandered around the grounds for a while, reluctant to go rest just yet. It had been a long trip, but this in-between moment of returning to town, but not home had him in a trance. A liminal space. Was this what it felt like for Will to dream?

Restless feet led him inside, where he was welcomed by the guards. One, or maybe two, pointed him towards the study, not that he really needed guidance on where to go. It was still very late, the household was trying to settle down for the night. There was a very likely chance that his Lordship would be in bed. He almost didn’t come, but his wife found solace in speaking to the man, and it couldn’t hurt to try. At least the Comte would know where his worries came from.

The door opened abruptly and the Comte smiled. It was a shy one, barely on his face, but it welcomed him regardless. The door opened wide and he stepped through. “Seeker Crawford, may I take your coat? I’m surprised you are up at this hour.”

He shook his head. “No. No. I, uh, I just wasn’t ready to go to the house yet. I’m not staying.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment, but his Lordship decided to break apart the silence. “I heard from your wife about her return to court. The Empress herself wished to speak with her about sending a replacement.”

“Yes. That’s part of it, isn’t it?” His Lordship tilted his head slightly, indicating for him to continue. “After that, she’s going to be spending time home again. We’ve talked about moving to Val Royeaux or maybe even going to Antiva or back to Rivain. We talk about a

lot of things and she tells me she's fine. She tells me she'll tell me when she's not fine. It feels like we're not talking about anything at all."

"You expect her to tell you more."

"She's going to be in Val Royeaux soon and I still can't talk to her. No courier, avian or otherwise, is going to be able to meet me in time. I'm relying on letters. I've been using letters to talk with her for the past year and then some. I finally see my wife again and there she goes. Not only can I not speak with her, but I know she's sick and going to die." It hit him like a boulder hurled by a giant. "What if she goes and I'm not there? What if I don't get to say goodbye?"

"So you haven't really talked about it."

"She doesn't want to. Whenever I bring it up, about what we're going to do or what things need to be taken care of, she immediately changes the subject." Jack looked up at him pleadingly, imploring for some hint.

"I'm not going to tell you what we talk about, Jack. Bella needs to be the one to tell you."

A spark of affront hit him. "You tell me about Will."

"Not really," the noble pointed out. "And what I do tell you, I am obligated to do so as the proxy go-between for Will and the Court of Orlais."

"And I don't get to know what's going on with my wife?" Jack asked, voice rising in volume. Only the beginning of the inquiry ringing out into the marble, stopped him from keeping it from rising further. Its noise allowed him to remember that he was yelling at a powerful noble in his own home.

Hannibal didn't take offense. Well, he didn't seem to anyway. "I suppose you do, but not from me."

Jack took a seat. His legs simply dropped once he did, as if they suddenly couldn't support him standing back up. His strength had been an illusion the entire time and he would never move again. "I'm watching it all fall apart. I don't want to stand outside of our relationship and watch it happen anymore; if that's what she wants then that's too bad. She married the wrong guy."

Lecter chuckled. It was a weak thing, born more from irony than actual humor. "I can promise that she doesn't think that."

The ceiling looked beautiful at night, the reflections of candles and stares entrancing. It was much easier to look at than the world around him. "All I can think about is where she's going to die and when. Will it be on the road? In the middle of Court? Next to me in bed at night? It brings this numbness that I can't describe, uncomfortable in its clarity."

"That's not going numb," his Lordship replied. "It is the dread of the loss of numbness."

“My wife is going to die,” Jack rolled the words in his mouth. They were sticky and made him aware of how little his tongue moved when he said them. “I’m dreading her loss and how I’ll feel then. With everything that’s been happening, I suppose I’ve been thinking about others as well.”

“Other losses?” Such an innocent question. “You can’t save your wife. She won’t let you and her illness won’t let you. Who else couldn’t you save?”

Who else indeed.

Back when they were chasing the Highwayman, back when they got desperate enough to recruit the youngest of them, Jack had to make a decision. He regretted it now, but not back then. He decided to show her a body.

Both of them were inside the barn of a local farmer. One of his employees had come to check on his absent boss and discovered him pierced through over and over on the various sharp implements used, pitchforks, shears, etc. The young man, if Jack recalled correctly, would later join the Chantry as a clerk in an attempt to find solace after the experience. Jack wondered if he found it or not.

“Where is everyone?” she asked, fiddling with the locket once more. He had been trying to train her out of the habit, but so far hadn’t been lucky. She’d need to grow out of it before she tried to get higher up in the Seekers. While for an average or extremely powerful Seeker that wasn’t an issue, a new one would be torn apart if they did that in Court. A tell could be dangerous should she end up on someone’s bad side and she didn’t have the attitude that would allow her to brazenly ignore the politics. There were only so many Cassandra Pentaghasts in the world.

“For now, it is just you and me.” She gave him a dubious look, which he shrugged off. “Everyone’s more than a bit busy trying to deal with the rumors of a darkspawn incursion in Ferelden. The Empress is trying to talk to everyone about how to approach the issue and everyone is falling over each other to talk to her.” Miriam nodded, appeased. It wasn’t entirely the truth. The truth was that everyone was also climbing over each other for this investigation and beating the whole thing senseless. “A fresh perspective would also help. Tell me what you see.”

Eventually, he left the main building of the estate and went to the guest house. It was strange to return to their ‘home’ without his wife there. She had left during the return trip from the Bastion d’Argent, apparently going to Val Royeaux at the behest of the Empress. They had talked extensively after Elliot Buddish about what they were going to do with this in mind and what that meant for their relationship. It was agreed that it would be best if she didn’t go to Kirkwall (as much as it pained her personally). By the time that she got there, she would be too sick to travel and not able to properly help Viscount Dumar. Empress Celene I was surprisingly compassionate about the affair, but requested that Bella come see her so that she could appoint a new ambassador and give them her notes on the area.

The whole place was cold. Well, it was colder than before at least. Having spent so many nights alone before Bella returned, the experience should not have been a foreign one. That didn't make it any less damaging.

However, candles were lit in the guest house. It didn't seem odd, at first, but only some of them were alight and in certain places. If they were all aflame, Jack would guess that the servants heard that he was coming home early and tried to make the place feel more comfortable (despite both Bella and Jack insisting on taking care of the space themselves for the most part).

He ventured further into the guest house, a rather small space compared to the main house. He arrived in the bedroom and drew back in horror. Before him was a ring of candles surrounding the bed. On the pillow was a ribbon surrounding a lock of golden hair. That in itself was upsetting, someone was in the guest house that he didn't know and left this lock of hair, right where Bella, his wife, laid her head at night.

What else was there was much worse.

On the center of the bed was the back half of a small silver locket that he hadn't seen in two years. The last time it had been in his sight, it had been on Miriam Lass's neck.

The half- locket had a note. On top of everything else, it had a note in it and, with comparisons made to previous writing samples, they managed to confirm that it was Miriam Lass's handwriting.

Jack,

Please! He's giving me a moment with this, but I don't know what to do. Every moment I've been down here was in the dark; I feel like I've been going blind. The first few moments he allowed me with the candlelight hurt more than I feel comfortable saying.

I don't want to die like this.

I was so wrong. I was so wro

From there, the rest of the words had been blotted out with ink. They had a person that was used to identifying and aging books come in to check it, and the note was confirmed as being around two years old. He had brought it there that very night and had waited throughout the week for any information on the subject, sending out and receiving messenger birds to exchange parcels. He had even been staying here through First Day while his crew was off celebrating the new year. When that bit of news had been confirmed, the last bits of hope he had remaining died.

"I'm so sorry Jack," Beverly told him. Beverly. She reminded him so much of Miriam sometimes, the same tenacity and willingness to push herself. There was a reason that she was his second, although Will was making headway there, too. He hoped that she could take over after he was gone; she had the gumption and the dedication to make it even to Lady Seeker one day. He was far too old and too set to do anything, but Beverly could, especially with Jimmy, Brian, and Will behind her.

To Void with it, maybe she could even find a way to allow mages into the Seekers and secure Will a place among them, a place of safety. Wardens did it after all, why couldn't they?

Brian had been staring at the note like it was a viper. "How did someone get that into the estate?"

Jimmy piped in, "I checked with Comte Lecter's security. No one saw anyone get in or out of the grounds and Lecter had declared the guest house off-limits except in special circumstances. Something about privacy?" The last bit was accompanied by an eyebrow waggle, but honestly the boss wasn't in the mood. Once he managed to convey that to Jimmy, he looked suitably cowed.

"If someone was dressed up as a guard, they might've been able to bypass scrutiny," added Will. "I know people were watching, but all it requires is a guard change and the guest house is free for roaming."

"If it wasn't a ghost." Looking pleased with herself, Beverly nudged Will's elbow.

"There's no such thing as ghosts!" protested Brian. Jimmy gave him a meaningful look, which only made him get louder."No proof!"

"What about-"

"Just a story."

"There is the Chateau," Will added.

"What?" gasped Beverly. Even Jack was a bit surprised, Will usually tried to stay out of their arguments, at least as far as he had seen.

He shrugged. "I came across it in the Emerald Graves and avoided the place like crazy after. The Avvar told me about it: Château d'Onterre."

"You've seen ghosts!" Beverly yelled and that's when Jack decided this was enough.

He stepped up between the four of them and they all went silent. "While this is fascinating, it doesn't tell us anything about Miriam Lass."

"Are you sure it's her?" asked Brian and he gestured to all of the handwriting samples. "We managed to access this, I'm sure someone could have forged it."

"It's what we have," he replied. "Look. You can continue to question my certainty if you wish, but the handwriting samples were exact matches. We had several people confirm it, and that was her personal locket. The Highwayman must have let her write a note before he killed her and made sure that the information she was going to give us was gone."

"Gideon hasn't had any way to contact anyone. If he was trying to sneak it into your house at a certain moment in time, there would've been no way he could have accomplished it in a timely manner," Will pointed out.

“Regardless,” said Jimmy. “We’ve got some people watching the air around the Bastion and Red Crossing and intercepting messages to check the contents, just in case someone gets some bright ideas.”

Jack hung his head in his hands while the group scattered. Will remained, standing slightly to his left behind his back. “Jack,” Will began, but Jack cut him off.

“Miriam Lass is dead and the Highwayman is making it clear that he and Abel Gideon are not the same.”

“Is she?” Will asked. “Paper can be aged.” Then he left.

Was she dead? He didn’t know which he would prefer: the young woman sacrificed in the line of duty or the one abandoned in the hands of a monster.

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Abigail smiled up at Will as he added Prophet’s Laurel to the mortar. Picking up the pestle, he very carefully began to grind up the herbs. “You want to make sure that it’s as thin as you can make it; if there are any chunks, it won’t feel right when someone drinks it in a potion and won’t mix well enough for a poultice.” He play-whispered to her as Eloise glanced across the way. She had been kind enough to allow them to work in the apothecary rather than attempt potioneering at home. He wasn’t that great at it. “If you don’t like a person, you can make one just slightly under-grinded. It won’t do anything bad to them, but the texture will be awful.”

She laughed and gestured to the pestle, which he readily passed over. He had to observe for a couple of minutes, but it looked like she was getting the hang of it.

“Will?”

He looked at Abigail, but she was concentrating steadily on the work, not taking her eyes away from it. “Abigail?” he asked, wondering if she had called for him anyway.

“Will?” Her mouth hadn’t moved.

“Will?” he jerked and suddenly Alana was there. She was looking concerned and glancing behind him.

There wasn’t an Abigail. The Andraste’s Grace that he had picked up was lying untouched on the work desk. Eloise was nowhere to be seen. His face felt like it had been smushed against the wood and his throat felt exceedingly dry, like he had been sleeping with his mouth open or had been talking for too long.

“Are you alright? It looked like you were dreaming,” asked his friend, face pinched in a concerned frown.

Jack came in behind her. “There you are! We’ve been looking all over for you.”

He rubbed his eyes. “Sorry. I was just sleeping.”

“Hmm…” Jack paused. It looked like he was going to say something that Will didn’t want to hear.

“What is it?” It hurt to speak.

A sigh. “Look, Will. We were coming to meet you, because I think I know a way that we can speak to the Highwayman. Perhaps even push him.”

Will turned away for a moment to pull his water flask from his supplies. It had been a week since he had been required to think about that monster and the whole Gideon affair, he had almost forgotten about it. Almost. It had been a refreshing time of bonding, he had even managed to celebrate First Day with Abigail, Alana and Beverly, but this morning had effectively ruined that and his efforts to get himself some alone time hadn’t panned out either. He drank slowly and surely, knowing that going too fast wouldn’t help at all; the elven man even splashed some onto his hand and then his face for good measure, hoping to bring some life to it. After he was sufficiently awakened and no longer parched, he turned back to them. “Push?” he asked, pursing his lips and hoping that someone would clarify.

Alana side-eyed Jack. “Seeker Crawford wishes to influence him to become visible. Enrage him.”

He rounded on his boss. “Why? To what purpose?”

Jack dismissed him with a wave of his hand. Behind the imposing man’s back, Alana shrugged and made a face. “I’m just asking for advice Will. Can we or can we not enrage the Highwayman and bring about his attention?”

“His attention’s already here Jack! I promise that he is very focused on Gideon; the man claimed to be him after all.”

The Seeker paused, as if Will’s words had finally struck him. What came out of his mouth next was not what Will had hoped for, though. “Claimed… For now, it’s only a claim. He needs to be the truth. We need to make him the truth.”

Even Alana looked struck at this one. “Jack! That could push him to kill!”

“I have to push!” he roared.

It took Will only a second to see what Jack did, and he did not like what he found. “Jack, no. There are a lot of ways to catch a murderer, but Freddie Lounds should not be one of them.”

“You know that her pamphlet goes everywhere, she makes sure of it. It’s the basis of a lot of rumors for a lot of folks, so if we can get her to run something, everyone will hear it. A lot of people will believe it. That will be what gets him,” Jack stated before exiting the room

Alana slumped, looking completely defeated. They simply stood there for a second, soaking it in. “He’s not been right with anything about the Highwayman since Miriam went missing. Whenever he gets mentioned, it riles Jack right up. It’s almost as if something entirely otherworldly was pushing him to act.”

Will snorted softly, a familiar feeling that was. “I can sympathize.”

Sister Alana gave him a look. “I’m going to join you on this one. I’m not a Seeker, but I once knew Gideon and I hope I can be of some help.”

“You knew Gideon?”

She nodded, “Yes, he was actually courting me for a while. I wasn’t very receptive to his intentions, but my parents were. I was much younger and he eventually came to the conclusion that he wasn’t right for me, thank the Maker. Finding out what he did in the Circle was another nail in the coffin that drove me away from the Game. It wasn’t the final one, but it certainly helped.”

He paused, waiting for Jack to be gone completely before he voiced his concerns. “Alana, I think something is being done to Gideon. I know he’s still a murderer, but -” Sighing, he handed over his notes. They contained everything that he had discovered in the Bastion and what research he had been doing in-between. “Just… look it over.”

They went to meet with Freddie Lounds, the Red Tattler. Honestly, Will couldn’t think of any possible worse idea and neither could Alana, when he asked. Convinced that he was on the right path, Jack would hear it from no one, so the two of them just followed the Senior Seeker to the meeting and hoped to monitor the situation.

It was better and worse than they could have hoped.

The bard in question was still at *The Dancing Fox* , the seedier of the two inns in Red Crossing. The place stank of stale ale and piss and, upon arriving, they were treated to how she had been allowed to stay there so long: singing. The ginger wasn’t terrible, but it was still by no means impressive. Still, entertainment was entertainment and the lot of drunks gathered round seemed impressed.

They waited for the song to finish to approach her. Alana had to be the one to ask; she was the unknown variable to Freddie (mostly) and therefore the least likely to be seen as a threat. They talked for barely thirty seconds before the ginger was turning towards where the two of them remained, smiling coyly. They left, and Will and Jack left alongside them.

It was a short walk to the barracks. How *The Dancing Fox* managed to keep up its less-than-legal business side without too much interference from the guards was amazing. Clearly the proprietor had some sort of connections in the guard or simply a lot of dirt on them. Probably both. When they reached the place, they ushered their ‘guest’ into the guard-captain’s office (who gave them a rather nasty look at being told that he had to leave again).

Very quickly, Jack positioned himself behind the desk, giving himself the seat of power. It was always a bit weird how power worked. If you are sitting down and they stand, that makes you more powerful than them, but if someone is higher up or towering over you, that gives them more power than you. Jack played both dynamics very carefully and always seemed to know which was appropriate when, something Will admired.

Clearly it was bothering the bard, because Lounds' smile waned when the large man sat and there was no seat for her. Will took up a position carefully leaning near, but not against the door. Better to not make her feel blocked in. Alana also remained standing, but to the side of both Jack and Freddie. A very careful game of chess was in the making.

The red-haired woman quickly summoned her smile, much faker this time around. "What a pleasant evening, Seeker Crawford. Thank you for inviting me."

Jack's face never lost its careful, yet pleasant, stoicism. He gestured towards Alana and Will. "This is Sister Bloom, our Chantry representative that was asked to be part of these proceedings. Of course, you know Will."

Freddie nodded to the both of them, feigning some form of respect. "Hello Sister Bloom. Ah, Will! So good to see you again." Will only looked at Jack, ignoring the snake to the best of his abilities.

Jack sat back in his seat, a sort of relaxation and casual disrespect. Will was abruptly struck with a realization. They were playing the Game. Right now. In front of him. The danger of this interaction became more apparent. He thought that because this involved a matter of justice and law, the Game would be left at court. Maybe it would be, because there was a mage, an elf mage to be exact, in the room with them. He should have known better; there was a bard involved.

"You distributed an unconfirmed story about the identity of the Highwayman to the courts of Val Royeaux and beyond. Honestly, I'm surprised," said Jack. "You have all of the traits that I associate with accomplished bards: ambition, intelligence, guts, moral ambiguity, and an eye for good information and where to find it. Yet, you are probably the least sought after bard in Orlais."

She smiled painfully, "It is a simple matter really. Bards are meant to be impartial, so I decided to be the most impartial of all. Nobles don't like it when people are airing their dirty laundry unprompted, but occasionally I get a job now and then."

"Well now you have one. You have an unconfirmed story; what I want is for you to confirm it."

The fox relaxed and smiled benignly. "An exclusive story."

"All of those pompous upstart bards would get the pleasure of watching your pamphlets suddenly put you at the head of the field. Orlais' Game tends to enjoy a bit of intrigue and murder to spice things up and the Highwayman has been a marvel for years."

Now was his turn to step in. Already she believed he hated her, and rightly so, so playing the role of making Jack Crawford look like the most reasonable person in the room was easy. Let him be the negotiator. "Unfortunately," he snarked. "You have a reputation for being a bit lax in the truth. Gossip is all well and good, but we are all going to struggle if everyone believes that what you write is already a lie." Role done, everything finished.

"Yes, that can be a problem," she breezed. "When I tried to get an interview, I was denied."

Alana side-eyed her. “You didn’t try to sneak in.” Hey, that was his job.

“Hard to get an interview in a high security cell when a person can walk in at any moment and you could join them. This is especially worrisome when the place is the base of an organization known as the ‘Seekers’.”

Jack waved his hand, a practiced motion of dismissal. “I can call in a few favors, and I know the High Seeker in charge of the Bastion. We can get you an interview.”

“And what’s my angle?” She was fond of getting right to the point. Rather appropriate and he could stop asking ‘when’ and say ‘finally’. Pleasantries were over. “Is he the Highwayman?”

Alana stared. “Possibly. There was a lot of time unaccounted for.”

Freddie smiled, “Not so fond of an old suitor, eh? Fair enough.” The bard approached the desk and reached over Jack to pull out some parchment and get ahold of some ink and a quill.

“Let’s get started.”

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When Alana had asked him to host a dinner for her and High Seeker Frederick Chilton, Hannibal greatly reconsidered their friendship. He still respected and appreciated the Sister, but that was a request so out of the ordinary that he wasn’t quite sure what to do with it. Then Alana showed him Will’s notes.

Clever boy, considering the possibility that Chilton was up to no good and then sneaking around to follow through. That practiced and innate lighter elven tread would always be of great aid to him. If the notes he had made were true, then new possibilities opened up. After all, studying Ben-Hassrath re-education techniques was an interesting past-time for a High Seeker; what was he doing?

A few of the techniques were intriguing, but Chilton had been doing them all wrong. How typical that he couldn’t even understand what he was looking at enough to recreate it correctly. All Hannibal had was a few vague notes and he understood the difference between the technique being studied and the one being employed.

He sent the invite shortly after he looked them over and managed to make his own copies of the more interesting notes. A few techniques seemed (as this was literally notes on a different party’s notes on a shoddy translation of descriptions of a technique, not the thing itself) similar to his own and might even enhance what he was working on, so no harm done. After they sent the invite, he and Alana worked with Will on their story. The elf in question was returning to the Bastion d’Argent with Jack Crawford and team. Seeker Crawford wanted some more information before he sent anything to Lady Seeker Prurnell.

Hannibal was slightly confused about why Will hadn’t told Seeker Crawford about his suspicions. That was a matter for another time.

The dinner was fairly simple; the dishes were light fare inspired by his homeland. Many visitors enjoyed Nevarran cuisine, often calling it exotic for the rich flavors he introduced to them. Today's was a modified stuffed lamb shoulder, serving the tongue in addition, having mixed it into the stuffing. The fruits and nuts combined with the herbs inside made the tongue palatable to his companions that hadn't appreciated it before, and if it wasn't actually lamb, it was not like they knew the difference.

"I don't believe that I've ever had tongue," Alana said as she settled at the table, napkin folded in her lap. Chilton also began seating himself.

"It was a particularly chatty lamb," Hannibal replied and she laughed, not truly understanding the joke, but it was mostly for him.

Chilton butted in, "There are rare birds in the Arbor Wilds that the Avvar used to kill to eat their tongues."

Wonderful. An opening if he ever saw one. "Don't give me any ideas; your tongue is very feisty." A smile to show that he was joking, but poor Frederick still seemed very put out. Oh well. He lifted his glass to his guests for a toast and the other two quickly joined him. Thankfully, he had managed before Frederick could tuck into the food.

"To the Highwayman. Abel Gideon is going to provide us the ability to study a rare kind of man, one without morals or emotions," Chilton blurted out. They lowered their glasses. "It's so rare for one to actually be captured alive; they're usually killed by whatever hero they go up against or the law itself."

Alana chimed in, "I'm not so sure. I've been speaking with Jack Crawford and Will fairly closely, observing the whole system to make sure it goes as the law dictates. Suggestion is always a possibility on the table with a mind as fragile as his. After checking in, I see three possibilities." Frederick tucked into the food with gusto. "Gideon is the Highwayman, he simply thinks he is, or he knows he isn't."

The man paused mid-bite and gently placed the fork back on the plate. "He is. He knows he is. So do I. What I wish to know is how much he still isn't telling me."

Hannibal frowned, "Did you discuss the Highwayman's murders with Monsieur Gideon before he murdered one of your apprentices?"

His guest snorted. "Only after I began to suspect what he was, but that's not enough to 'suggest' to him that he is the Highwayman." His slight mocking of Alana caused her to narrow her eyes, but nothing beyond that. Clearly, she was getting back into the swing of things.

Alana sat back, making herself comfortable in the chair. "I've been researching a lot lately. With everything that's been happening in Kirkwall, a lot of the Mothers have decided that we need to know how to reach people from different religions. I've met a couple of the Qunari, or Tal-Vashoth now, that told me horror stories about what some people had done to keep the population compliant." Leaning forward, she masked her face in the picture of idle nobleness, morbid curiosity without the truth of the horror. It made Hannibal rather proud. "One man

told me that he left because the Qunari believe that nothing should be wasted. People they captured or people that didn't agree… they were 're-educated'. He said, 'You keep a man awake long enough, ask the right questions, give him the right potions, and you can make him say and even think anything.' We're a lot more fragile than we'd like to believe."

Chilton managed to only look slightly nervous, but very affronted. "Are you suggesting that I've done something similar?"

She shrugged and leaned back. "Of course not. For one, the Chantry would never allow it, and two, you are simply not that type of person. What I am suggesting is that perhaps in your path to make Gideon admit to his deeds and understand him better, you might have stumbled on something similar."

His face did not change. "Even in the pursuit of knowledge, a lot of what you just suggested is highly suspect."

Hannibal interjected, "It could be, however, seen as reasonable under certain circumstances."

Alana's expression was practiced disdain. "What circumstances?"

"If he really was the Highwayman, perhaps reminding him required a little more pressure than otherwise thought. It might have unfortunately coincided with some undesirable techniques, but in the name of the greater good…" Alana scoffed and turned away from Chilton, but Hannibal could see a slight smile. A glance at the considering look on Chilton's face also gave the slightest thrill. It was wonderful to be playing the Game with a partner again and it seemed that they may have one this round.

"High Seeker Chilton, would you be so kind as to aid me with dessert?"

Gesturing up from the table, Hannibal left to the kitchen with the eager High Seeker following behind. The dessert spread was meant to be light and sweet fare, whipped sweet creams and bite-sized pastries. Chilton eyed everything on the table like he would stuff it in his bag and take it back to the Bastion with him.

"I love Antivan grapes. They are the same deep purple inside and out. In most grapes, the color is restricted to the skin, but here the flesh is similar."

"A grape with nothing to hide," Chilton breezed, completely missing the point. Hannibal didn't bother to correct him.

"Were I in your position, I might have attempted some dubious methods to obtain a confession as well. If you suspected something, I'm sure you were well within your right."

Eyes narrowed at him suspiciously. He should probably have been taught to be a better player. It wasn't difficult to hook him. "I promise, I am much more forgiving of the unorthodox than Sister Bloom."

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High Seeker Chilton and Jack had switched places for the short interim. The man apparently wanted Jack to see more of the facility and how he ran things in order to get an appreciation for the training process and how it was run now. If he was honest with himself, and Jack Crawford frequently was, he took Chilton up on the offer to get a better chance of studying the "Highwayman" up close. Mostly this meant going through his belongings. Abel Gideon was allowed a certain amount of parchment and charcoal to keep him busy during his downtime (why, the Seeker couldn't be bothered to learn). This also meant going through the mail he had yet to receive, which the Seekers were supposed to do anyway.

"Riveting stuff?" asked Gideon, amused at Jack's glancing through his private note book and the letters the office received this morning. "Honestly, I'm flattered most of the time, but I'll admit that the occasional person comes on a bit too strong."

Jack simply hummed, trying not to give Gideon too much. He wasn't wrong though; it boggled the mind that some of the people in here genuinely wanted a mass murderer and potential serial killer to be their partner. A lot of them were nobles too. Seriously, he wasn't sure how Chilton hadn't managed to go further up the food chain than he had; there was enough in this pile to put many of Empress Celene's trusted advisors and sycophants in his debt. It was as if the many genuinely had no clue about the political ramifications and duties of his job.

Actually, that was very likely.

"Are you looking for anything instructional? Diagrams? Pictures?" Gideon asked, clearly not pleased at being ignored. Fair enough, the man was probably ignored at best on a regular basis. "Don't think I can recreate one of my own murders from memory?"

"I highly doubt it, simply because it isn't your memory that you're creating it from.

The prisoner huffed and laid against the bars. "Agree to disagree."

He sighed. The only way to get him to open up is to stay friendly and calm. "Alright then. Why take organs? I highly doubt you were conducting some blood magic ritual."

Gideon froze and Jack got the distinct impression that he had stumbled into a giant spider den. The man relaxed a moment later. "Why not?" he drawled. "Maybe I wanted to understand the appeal. Maybe I wanted to understand what people were truly like, under all that personality and flesh."

Strange. "Why didn't you take anything during your massacre?"

"In case you didn't notice, Seeker Crawford, I was in a bit of a hurry." He shifted position, moving away from the bars. "You're not here to talk about all of that though."

"Oh?" asked Jack. He had stopped paying attention to the letters a while ago, but was starting to see the appeal in retreating back to them.

"Your little Seeker-in-training. The novice Miriam Lass."

Jack eyeballed him from the pile still yet to be read. “Are you telling me that you killed Lass?”

Gideon pouted, hiding his eyes and chin behind bars. “I didn’t want to kill her. Don’t be mad at me.”

It felt wrong. False. Was that the shock of hearing it out loud, a denial, or was it an instinct he was trying to push down believing it to be false? “I’m not mad at you. I know who and where you are and how you got here. Why are you suddenly being so forthcoming?”

Gideon retreated to the side of his cage and sat, still leaning against the bars. He probably had this done as an intimidation tactic before. Jack wondered if Chilton fell for it. “What do I have to lose?” he stated. “You know who I am, where I am, and how I got here.”

“Why not put her on display?”

A grin came, all teeth and no smile. “Who’s to say that I didn’t? You should really re-evaluate what you consider a ‘display’.”

Jack decided that he heard enough and gathered up the letters to leave the room. “It’s rude to leave in the middle of a conversation you know.” The Seeker didn’t bother dignifying that with an answer. “You can at least say farewell instead of just ignoring me.”

That’s when Jack saw it. A letter felt a bit heavier than the others and slipped out of his grasp because of it. When he picked it back up, there was a bulge in the packaging. At first, he thought it might be a ring. The Seeker left the room to further investigate, no longer wanting to share space with a former comrade.

The first thing he saw when he opened it was the note.

They watch you in silence, until dawn’s light.

They blink at you throughout the night.

Burning pictures ever so bright

But sometimes, you see them back.

It was written in Miriam Lass’s handwriting. The bulge in the package fell out as well. It was the other half of her locket.

After receiving the letter, Jack took his squad aside to try and figure out why it was in Gideon’s mail and what that meant for the rest of them. All four members of the team were holed up in one of the rooms; they didn’t want to risk one of the novices roaming about learning of the situation. They dedicated their lives to this and not many enjoyed being faced with the reality of the situation: they will die. So many dreamed of glory, and so few achieved it.

“So, the actual Highwayman learns that people suspect Gideon of being him-”

“Them,” chimed in Beverly.

“Suspects Gideon of being them and chooses to send a letter to Gideon with a riddle and the missing half of the locket that came from Miriam Lass,” finished Brian, nicely summing up this mess.

“Well, they found out where Jack was staying; I doubt it would be difficult for them to figure out where he was going either,” replied Beverly, shrugging.

“Bit ballsy to try and put it in the mail of a mass murderer though,” commented Jimmy. “There was a chance that no one would check it or it would get lost. I think we established that Chilton probably doesn’t check his mail.”

“He’s supposed to.”

“And that means what?”

Will glanced over at Jack. He had been getting progressively quieter as of late, which bothered the Seeker. He had stopped contributing to group conversations. The elf still listened, he just spoke less. The guilty part of Jack claimed it had something to do with the incident from a month ago, when he had tried to quit. He had thought that the two had repaired trust by the end of it, but it felt like his charge was keeping something from him.

“Jack,” the elf asked. The others grew quiet. “Whoever is doing this thinks that you were close to Miriam Lass and feel responsible for her. Did you know you were sending her after the Highwayman?”

That stung. “I sent her after information.” He was sending Will after information. Was this why he really went after the elf? “That doesn’t make me any less responsible for her death. I took her on as an apprentice. I left her to her own devices.” He was doing that with Will.

Was he? Will wasn’t alone, he had the Comte.

He regretted it immensely, their last conversation, his last instructions. It could have gone so much better. Miriam could still be here.

She had come into his study while he was working on paperwork. Nobody told you about that when you joined the Seekers, the damnable bureaucracy was more than half the battle. When you were attached to a training facility, you sent letters day in and day out, keeping records and taking notes. Admittedly he wasn’t in the best mood, but just a while earlier he had learned that Miram had been skipping out on training. Worse, she had been sneaking away from Bastion without permission for unexplained periods of time. People not in charge of her training had now begun to ask him where she was. It was no secret that he was her mentor after all.

He didn’t even let her speak. “Don’t you have training with the Weaponmaster today?” She didn’t reply. “You’re still in training, Lass.”

Lass grimaced, rolling her bottom lip between her teeth and brow furrowing. “Yes, Seeker, but I thought this was more important.”

“You’re good at the ‘seeking’ part of the job, but I have noticed that you could improve in swordplay. Last time I saw you, you were sloppy.”

“Isn’t this more important?” his protege rushed out. “Finding the Highwayman will take a murderer out of commission and help so many people.”

“You need to be learning; that’s what you’re here for. Weapon use, theology, and proper protocol.” He made sure to stress the last bit.

“Seeker?”

“Lass,” he sighed. “I learned about your adventures in Verchiel and nearby parts of the highway. Flashing the insignia and going into people’s homes is not a way to achieve your status. We’re Seekers of Truth, not Grey Wardens.”

“I just thought,” she paused. A hand moved up to touch the locket, but she stopped it before it could.. “I think I’m onto something. It seems like the Highwayman might’ve been an employer, someone at the nearby vineyard.”

He leaned forward. “People value their privacy; poking around their homes to learn more about who they work for is not something that provides ease. However, it would be one thing for a full-fledged Seeker to go about flaunting rules and power as such. It would be a very different thing for a novice not even ready for her vigil to do it.”

She smiled, understanding him at last. “Better for a novice to ask for forgiveness and manage to catch a killer, then a Seeker to ask for permission and likely never get it?

A shrug and a shift to bring her at ease. “In my experience.”

“Then I hope you forgive me for skipping my lessons today.”

He never saw her again.

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“...to subvert your sense of control; you may not realize it unless those methods are pointed out to you.”

Gideon scoffed, “My dear boy, that in itself is a manipulative method.”

“Two years,” Will asked more than said. “You were able to contain yourself for two years. Why now?”

Gideon shrugged, still eyeing him. “No real opportunity.”

Will pulled out his notebook. “You were never left alone in the dark for extensive periods of time. You were never left starving and then fed various potions. Nothing like that.”

For his efforts, the elf received a massive eye roll. “I was given everything par for the course. All of that stuff you just talked about? Most Seekers go through something similar as part of our vigil. It wouldn’t affect me, not the way that you’re talking about.”

“Every bit of it?”

Languidly, Gideon moved closer to the bars and pressed against them. Will shifted slightly from his cross-legged position on the floor on the other side of the bars. He was technically just outside of the other man’s reach, but if he moved a small amount closer then the prisoner would be able to touch him. Will wasn’t interested in taking a chance like that right now. “Not every bit,” Gideon replied. “But enough.”

“What if I could help you? What if Chilton is doing something to you?”

Gideon moved so that he was closer to Will. “How am I supposed to trust you? You are a mage after all.”

Will stiffened slightly. He had been careful to leave anything that would mark him as a mage out of this room. Jack Crawford had even checked him over. He was also almost sure that he had done as much the first time he had visited, too. How did Gideon know?

The man behind the bars laughed. “Word gets around, young Will. There aren’t any elves operating with the Seekers unless they’re servants. I wanted to see what one was doing with a squad of them. A few pokes and prods was really all it took.”

He didn’t reply. There was nothing to say.

“You know what I heard? That you have a ‘special’ connection to the Fade. You can communicate with spirits and they like speaking back. They like you a lot.” Gideon stuck a hand through the bars and moved it across the floor in between them. The fingers were quickly approaching his leg, but Will forced himself not to move. The bars stopped the arm before it could crawl further, but that left the mage very aware that there was a hand only an inch or two away from him.

“They let you mirror people, giving them aspects remaining in dreams. Do you talk like them? Do you think like them? Do you dream like them?”

He remained silent.

“Watch out if you do. If you’re not careful, there won’t be anything left.”

After the incident with Gideon, Will left the dungeons of the Bastion as soon as possible. He simply did not feel comfortable waiting there for much longer. Luckily for him, it was around this time that Beverly made contact. She approached while he was trying to decide whether he would be comfortable remaining inside of the fortress; he was a Dalish after all, he knew a thing or two about sleeping outside and making safe camps. Honestly, he was just trying to convince himself out of it.

It was when he reached the stables that he heard it: “Will! We figured out the riddle!” He whirled around to find her there, racing towards him.

She skidded to a stop within three feet, the sheer speed that she was running having him step back before her arrival in case she didn’t stop in time. He didn’t want to test out his new healing magic on his friends without trying to better understand it beforehand. “You figured out the riddle?”

“We figured it out,” she wheezed out in one harsh breath. “The stars. He was talking about the stars.”

“And?”

A couple of more gasps and Beverly was well enough to speak. “It took us a minute,” she breathed out. “We managed to figure it out by using the last of her notes that we found. Apparently she had been investigating our man in Verchiel, having been looking into the local vineyards where he worked. There was a jump or leap.” She leaned forward and put her hands on her knees and then glanced up at Will. “You make those.” It came a bit out of left field.

“Out of the Fade or with evidence.”

She shook her head, “Not my point. We retraced what we could of her steps, but that threw us off. Still, thinking about the riddle compared with Verchiel, where Miriam was last seen, we know where we have to go: Observatoire de Verchiel.”

“What?” asked Will, but Beverly was already explaining.

“It was a failed project on the part of the city of Verchiel to put them more on the map. They wanted to be more involved in the scholarly life of Orlais, so they put up an observatory for students. Some thought that they wanted to usurp the University of Orlais, but even if they did, not enough people came this way to know what the Observatoire de Verchiel was, let alone that it existed. It’s been closed for years.”

“Perfect for our killer.”

Jack wasn’t outside when they arrived, so they had still thought that they could case the scene first. It had taken less than a day’s ride with the pace that they were going.

The Observatoire de Verchiel was a quiet dome, weathered and cracked. Parts of it were just weak enough that Will was sure it would only take another month or a suitably heavy storm before they fell through. The walls of the upper floor were only half walls and due to being a dome, the most external ones didn’t have a roof. It would be an annoying place to stay, but as an observatory it could work. It wasn’t the upper floor that they had to worry about though.

They entered the building to find everything covered in half-rotted drapes; the cloth might’ve been sheer except for the dirt and dust coating it. Some even hung from the ceiling, obscuring the path. The trio maneuvered through the maze until they were facing Jack Crawford’s back.

The man stood frozen before something and startled when they arrived, allowing Will to see past him.

An arm, half rotten, but fresh enough to still be an arm, sat on a small table. It was curled around a small note, written in the same script as the riddle in blood red lettering:

‘What do you see?’

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A week after finding the arm, presumably of Miriam Lass, Jack found himself visiting Comte Lecter while the man was staying with Lord Froideveaux. Apparently with Winter halfway over, the nobility had a responsibility to attend a few of the Empress’ parties in Halamshiral at the famed Winter Palace. It wasn’t going to be just him going; His Lordship was bringing Abigail and Alana with him. Apparently after the events of the last few months, the noble had taken a liking to her and applied for guardianship from the Chantry. Alana refused to let the girl out of her sight, still seeing her as a ward. Just as well. Now they had the two people they needed to keep track of in the same place. They just needed to move their base to Halamshiral instead.

For the evening, Lord Froideveaux and Comte Lecter had graciously agreed to allow him to dine at the estate. Lord Froideveaux apparently had already made his way to Halamshiral with a close friend, but his Lordship was still present and allowed to remain until the following day. After their meal, once they were done with pleasantries, they took to the study and partook in some wine. That was when he chose to disclose the conclusion of the investigation.

“What would be the benefit of making you believe your apprentice was still alive?” his Lordship asked as soon as he finished. They were gathered by the fireplace, sipping on some Vint-9 Rowan’s Rose, which was exquisite. It certainly loosened his tongue.

“Hope,” he replied, wistfully. The half-forgotten whisper of a young woman that simply wanted to do her best remained in his ears. “The Highwayman wanted me to hope and be worse off for it.”

The look on his Lordship’s face might have been pity, but it was hard to tell. “It can sometimes be brave to allow yourself to hope.”

“And stupid. I once went to a place in the Western Approach that had a canyon where a sign outside the mouth said “Abandon Hope”. That day, my commander told me and the other fresh-faced Seekers that abandoning hope is wise. It allows your expectations to be reasonable and keeps you focused on the here and now.” He took another sip and rolled it on his tongue. “That’s not why I’m here though. I know it was a while ago, but it was wrong of me to come to you and ask about what you discussed with my wife. She craved privacy and a sympathetic ear on the matter, and I was attempting to subvert that.”

The Comte bowed his head. “Do not worry. I won’t discuss your visits with her anymore than I’ll discuss her visits with you.”

Jack smiled a little sadly. “Please don’t,” he implored. His wife had enough to worry about; Bella shouldn’t have to worry about his anxiety, too. He should have respected her wish for counsel, and would endeavor to do so in the future.

“May I ask, when your apprentice disappeared… how long did it take you to give up hope?”

The Seeker sighed. They were back on this topic and he would rather not discuss it more. It had already been a trying few weeks and he needed the space to process the whole mess. A week felt like too short of a time. His squad had been avoiding him. Beverly and Will had been sending messages back to Red Crossing and were currently on their way back from picking up his hounds; Brian and Jimmy had left for Halamshiral yesterday to find a base for them to set up in the local Chantry. He was alone, but he had told Hannibal enough that the man deserved to know the truth.

Hannibal. Huh. Perhaps familiarity with someone outside of all of this business would do him some good. He might have to broach being on a first name basis with the man at another time. It was long enough between the question and his comment and his Lordship had simply been staring implacably. Finally, he opened his mouth, “I lost hope the minute I was told that she was missing. Each minute that passed, I gave up a little more.”

“Don’t give up on your wife. Not yet.”

He looked into the fire, watching it burn up the logs that kept it going. “She’s already given up. No matter what happens, the disease is already fatal. I tried talking her into staying with a healer and finding a way to maintain what she has now for as long as she can, but… she’s not interested.” He sighed, eyes watering from the heat and something else. “I almost want to force her to, but that isn’t my call to make.”

A hand placed itself on his shoulder. It was so unusual that Jack actually looked at it to make sure it was still attached to Comte Lecter and not a corpse or a vision of some kind. “She’s lost hope. That means that you can’t.”

Chuckling humorlessly, Jack responded, “You think that I can control that?”

“Take control.”

So strange, to hear something like that said out loud. Taking control of his emotions, thoughts, pushing them into a shape that he needs, not one he is comfortable with. What would that mean? What would that look like?

“My deepest apologies about your wife, Jack.” Jack. “I truly am. The world is a better place with her in it. And I’m sorry about your protege.”

“For a moment, I allowed myself to believe the impossible. I paid for it.”

Comte Lecter looked at Jack for a minute as if he was deciding something. “Tell me about her. What was her name?”

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“My name is Miriam Lass; I’m with the Seekers of Truth. I’m not an official member yet, but I am training to be one.” That was the first thing that Miriam Lass had said to Hannibal Lecter as he allowed her into his home in Verchiel. At the time, he did have one. He wouldn’t half a year after this encounter.

“Never say that you aren’t one yet, Madame. Always be a Seeker-in-training. Please, come in,” he had replied, hoping to put the young woman at ease. As soon as she had stated where she was from, what organization she was a part of, he knew she wouldn’t, couldn’t be allowed to go back.

“We have recently been investigating the Lemaitres’ vineyard. I’m to understand that you frequent the area for some of your favorite wines. Could you tell me a bit about the employers and employees there? Is there anything odd or out of place?”

Hannibal had simply smiled and asked, “May I ask why?”

“There was a murder that took place recently and the deceased used to work there. We just wanted to make sure there wasn’t any foul play.”

The deceased was a rude vineyard worker that had made reprehensible comments about his employers, the clients, and his fellow employees. He also had been drinking from the barrels that had already been paid for and spitting and coughing into them as well.

“I may have heard about that recently, but I don’t recall anything of that nature,” he replied instead.

She rushed to explain, “You were just one of their more recent customers and touring the vineyard during one of his shifts.”

“I was?”

The apprentice shrugged, “You were on the books.”

“I do like to keep notes on my tours for later review, especially when I’m trying something as lucrative as wine. Perhaps I have something?” She smiled and he felt a small pang of regret that he would have to get rid of her. Such a bright young mind. Miriam was too close, however, and would need to go.

Harellan

Chapter Summary

> The move to Halamshiral coincides with a mysterious murder. Hannibal, Jack, and Will each deal with their own kind of hauntings, while Alana and Abigail struggle against becoming ghosts.

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
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> Harellan: Trickster or liar (under very specific circumstances, rebel); also used by the Dalish to mean a traitor to one's kin
>
> Sorry for the lateness of this chapter. I spent the first half of my week in Boston and Salem, Massachusetts and spent my nights at a motel with low internet connection. When I finally came back I was working full day shifts at work and doing appointments and also was generally too exhausted too function. Finally! The chapter is up though.
>
> So yes, I edited this chapter while I was in Salem, Massachusetts and wrote it right after I played Man of Medan. See the inspiration?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The move to Halamshiral had been a rough one, all in all. Beverly was kind enough to help him transport all of the hounds in the cart and make sure that all of his meager belongings came with him, which made the whole journey a lot easier. Of course, he made sure to collect a bit of his rent that never really went into effect because he paid way in advance and the subletter was very understanding about the whole business. It had been a couple of years since he stayed in one place, at least the elf could call the experience in Red Crossing overall a positive one.

Will was probably the first elf to say that in several centuries.

The road to Halamshiral was distinctly less positive. They were besieged by at least two bandit groups, both of which didn't really get anything due to early warnings and Mabari being scary, and no less than a dozen people mistook Will for Beverly's servant. Better to be thought a servant than an apostate, but it did smart.

She made it better, of course, by pretending to be as pompous as possible and ordering him around for half the day. It was annoying, but the kind of annoying that came from friendship rather than resentment. After about number seven, she stopped doing it, but it did make him forget about the weary travel slightly. After that, she just stuck to loudly calling him ‘servant’ when they passed by nobility on the road.

They also sniped at various people and made up stories for them as they watched. Will actually got to use his natural empathy for understanding something other than spirits. It felt good and it was fun to reveal little nuggets of scandal to Bev. They always managed to draw them out to their furthest conclusion and make them as silly as possible. He had the sneaking suspicion that the reality was probably wilder than what they imagined, truth tending to be stranger than fiction. It was Orlesian nobility too, and they were, as a general rule, rather… odd.

They called a massive power structure which revolved around backstabbing, murder, scandal, and worse a ‘game’ after all. There was also *The Randy Dowager Quarterly* , which he would only partially understand. For some reason, Beverly had several issues and brandished them at him without shame.

‘Five scarves fluttered in shock out of five.’ He whole-heartedly agreed and if Beverly tried to get him to read her bad smut one more time, he might throw it into the road. “The Moonlit Dance” had to be the absolute worst thing he had ever read and “Bow-Strings” showed that humans still thought very *very* strange things about the Dalish. Katz had just sat and watched his face the entire time he had read both, cackling as his expression transformed into horrified incredulity. He had thrown both novels at her.

They were ‘novels’. It was ridiculous.

Once they were in the city, Will was surprised to see that it had a thriving elf population, of which every single member resided in varying forms of poverty. Sure, some had a nice in-between place, but they usually lived among the humans or by leaving their families behind in the Alienage. He wasn’t too fond of the idea of living among a crowd, but Beverly convinced him not to go too far away. Luckily for him, the Alienage of Halamshiral was huge and spread out into a sort of farmland. He managed to get a tenement at the absolute furthest point away from the hustle and bustle. Beverly was staying with family, apparently this was the Alienage that she was from, but she made him promise to keep an open spot for her. Sometimes you need to get away from even your family from time to time, so he understood.

Home alone with his Mabari, Will unpacked and made the space as comfortable as possible. As soon as he arrived, Jack had sent over a large book filled with notes and sketches about the Highwayman and his multitude of murderers. Ever since the incident with Gideon, Jack had been rampaging, as subtly as possible of course. It seems he had decided that now was the time to point Will in his true quarry’s direction.

From what he gathered of the Highwayman, he did his murders three at a time. To him, they weren’t murderers, simply culling the herd. The bodies were left along the Imperial Highway (and the various cities built nearby) as if they were plucked out of beautiful paintings, which is how he earned his name. After three pieces were created, he wouldn’t kill for months. Then he would strike again.

Clearly the man had some medical knowledge; the bodies wouldn't have been done so cleanly otherwise. He had time, control over the environment, confidence that nothing would go wrong, a certain kind of perception that would allow him to go unnoticed by always being noticed. His way was a brutal one, distinct in the attempts to create beauty from it. Then, he left them with two years of nothing.

Will was absolutely sure that after the arm of Miriam Lass, there wouldn't be 'nothing' for much longer.

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If there was one thing that Hannibal Lecter was always going to be certain about (and would look forward to that certainty), it was that Celene always threw wonderful parties.

The Winter Palace was as radiant as usual with the marble and gold trimming giving it a certain glow. Tapestries featuring all manner of art hung from the walls, a few of the more scandalous ones placed for the daring. People were gathered around in groups, sipping wine and gossiping about the latest bit of news, masks were everywhere. He was a little late this season, having missed the hubbub of the winter that the Palace was named for. Still, he knew that Celene would be staying for the spring with the most recent attempt on her life taking place in Val Royeaux. She would be keeping a close eye as the current hub of political life temporarily stayed in Halamshiral.

His own attire was far more opulent than even he was used to; one must start out the season with a good impression after all. He kept it dark in comparison with the rest of the crowd, red and black stripes moving through the grey attire. It often helped rather than hindered to remind them of his birthplace; it kept him aloof and mysterious in this crowd of frivolity. Tonight, his mask was inlaid with obsidian and the nose pushed out into a beak; every eye would be drawn to him at the wonder of his sheer audacity.

Never let it be said that he didn't enjoy the attention.

Couples were dancing around each other, both on the floor and in circles surrounding it. Some were doing it more literally than others. The Dowager herself was present, speaking on the poor fate of her latest husband, suitors surrounding her in an effort to be the one that actually lasts this time. After all, the woman had plenty of money from her last seven and was getting on in her years.

He was so caught up in the music, the smells, the sights, that he almost didn't notice Celene herself approaching. "Hannibal," she cried out, trailed by her three handmaidens and her elven servant Briala.

He bowed, as was fitting of his station compared to hers, "Your Radiance." She was the Empress and had played the Game well enough to pull the station out from under the grasp of her cousin Gaspard at the age of sixteen.

His Empress came forward, hands clasped together. She was looking as radiant as her Palace, the title being an apt description. Her blue gown flowed around her, one shoulder draping more around the arm and surrounded folds of gold cloth. The collar dropped low, showing the

barest hint of an elaborate corset, the empty space filled with several necklaces that managed to not look gaudy. The back of the dress had a large elaborate design of a sunburst that came up and framed her head, white-blonde hair curled and draped on her shoulders. The mask was gold and looked like a lion, covering the upper half of her face.

Celene was, without a doubt, one of the most eye-catching ones there. Briala behind her barely had eyes for anyone else, despite undoubtedly (at least to him) being Celene's spymaster. A small part of him was curious if his own spymaster had been doing her job tonight. Nesiraya had successfully infiltrated the kitchens last time he had checked. There was something about Celene and Briala's rumored romance that always captured the eyes of those that were in the know. It tickled at him now.

"It has been far too long since you've properly cooked for us, Hannibal," Celene said, clearly enjoying the night.

"You must come to my suite, and I will cook for you," he replied, knowing this dance far too well.

She made a disgusted noise. The people around had begun to try and eavesdrop on their conversation without being too noticeable. Both of them had noticed. They had not gotten this far and kept their positions for this long without being able to. "I mean properly, Hannibal. It means dinner and a show." Usually such talk about a nobleman cooking would invite scandal and reproach, but his eccentricities were often excused. When someone like Celene seemed to admire them, they were lauded. She turned to those around, "Have you seen him cook? It's an entire performance. The winter and spring before last, you hosted the most exquisite dinner parties. We certainly missed you last year."

"You know one must visit family sometimes," he replied. He had returned to Nevarra last year to speak with his aunt in the wake of his uncle's death. Getting caught up and staying for the whole season had been a bit of a spur of the moment thing. "I will again, though, once inspiration strikes."

"Of course," she acquiesced.

"Come Celene, we must enjoy the night while it is still young," Hannibal took her arm in his and guided her to the dance floor. Briala hovered behind, ever watchful.

They enjoyed each other's company, having been as close as one could afford to be in this dangerous game of politics. He knew several of her secrets, even if she knew only a few of his (and none of them the important ones). He had a feeling that she wouldn't mind.

"So," she began once they were away from prying ears. It was always harder to eavesdrop on someone when they were constantly moving to music. If you tried, it was extremely obvious to everyone and often led to embarrassment. "I've recently heard that you've acquired a pet project." He wasn't surprised that she knew about Will.

"Pet project is an interesting word for it."

“I would love to meet him sometime,” his Empress requested. “You know I’ve always had a fascination for magic and the occult. It would be interesting to hear about Dalish magic from a more reliable source.”

“Of course, Your Radiance,” he replied.

“Now Hannibal,” she looked playfully cross. “You know you can dispense with the titles around me. I don’t bite.”

“Of course, Celene.”

She glanced over at something behind him and smiled mischievously. “I do believe that Lord Froideveaux is trying to get your attention.”

If he was a different person, he might have groaned in exasperation. The man had been dogging him since their last conversation, always trying to find reasons to stumble into each other now that they were in the same estate. Celene seemed to sense his energy. “I could have him thrown from the Palace.”

“No, he is harmless.”

She hummed. “He has been spending a lot of time with Lord Budge.”

“Lord Budge?” Hannibal asked. He was unfamiliar with that name.

Her Radiance’s mouth twitched, an expression of glee. “I’m surprised Hannibal. You’re usually so up to date with the affairs of court. He’s new blood from a merchant family in Rivain. Surprisingly not affiliated with the Felicisima Armada.”

Hannibal hummed deep in thought and dragged his eyes over to the still-waiting noble. She quietly nodded as the song ended and the two finished their dance with a bow. Behind him, he could hear Lord Froideveaux getting ready to ask for his next one.

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The music from the ball wafted through the rafters and the halls of the Winter Palace, creeping through all of its secret and not-so-secret places. In one of the not-secret suites, Abigail Hobbs was reclining on a lounge while Sister Alana Bloom thanked Nesiraya for checking in on them and bringing them food from the kitchens. The Sister, well former Sister now, gently took the elven woman aside to the next room. The idea of eavesdropping did occur to Abigail, briefly, but she found that a large part of her simply didn’t care.

It had been interesting, moving to Halamshiral. She was in a strange new world, far away from the quiet of her little farm back home. Comte Lecter had insisted that she come with him, citing the Chantry’s stifling environment and procuring the necessary documents to make her officially his ward. He was… supporting her. Being family. Unlike some other people that she didn’t feel like naming.

The Winter Palace was large and beautiful and so very overwhelming. Almost, she had yelled out, “I don’t belong here, your Lordship, can I go back home?” The nobles and the people

she was around now were stunning both in artifice and in personality. They dressed in gold and lies and smiled with masks on their faces, the real ones and the ones underneath them. Her new guardian hadn't given her new clothes prior to arriving, citing the need to look out for the newest fashions and give her a chance to clean up and rest before investing in her new 'armor'. The looks that she had received spoke louder than any scream and let her know just how unwelcome she would be.

When they were younger, she, Marissa, and some of the other girls would dress up in their best clothes and put flowers in their hair. They prance around with exaggerated manners and pretend to be nobles at court. As they got older, the romance and intrigue of the Game became an adventure for those that could read. Those that couldn't would have their friends tell them tales and the latest gossip. Now, having learned from her new and former guardians how much one could stand to lose, the Grand Game didn't seem so fun to play.

Thus, Abigail remained in the suite of Comte Lecter with Alana, out of the way and (feasibly) out of danger. It felt cheap and it felt like hiding. She knew that it could result in death, but a small part of her wanted to throw it back in all of their faces. 'Here I am! This is what I've been through! You have no right to judge me or treat me like I'm fragile!'

It wouldn't help anyone. If only she wasn't in a place where she had been distant gossip for the last few months, then, perhaps, she could feel less like they thought of her as weak. When could she be a person again?

"Here we are," Alana said as she rejoined her in the living space. The older woman was carrying a tray with some hors d'oeuvres and light wine. It was placed on a small table that they had moved so that they could eat in the common area rather than the dining room or one of their rooms. His Lordship could disapprove later.

The whole thing was covered with different tartlets, from salmon tartare to porcini mushrooms. It seemed like everyone was busy with savory at the moment. Alana sipped at the wine and made a face. "You might think it amusing, but I prefer ale."

Abigail took a few sips of wine as well; it was fairly understated, as far as wines go. Clearly it was meant to draw more attention to the food. "I never would have guessed. You don't seem like the type."

The ex-Sister raised an eyebrow. "Not rough and tumble enough?"

"Maybe." That got her a laugh.

After their mirth died down, she looked to the other woman rather seriously. "Why do I have to stay up here again? He said that I'm going to join him among the nobility eventually, why not now?"

Alana sighed and set down her drink, never a good sign. "Abigail, the court is dangerous and it can be isolating. We don't want either of those things for you. We agreed that we would take the time to teach you proper etiquette and educate you on other matters of importance before we presented you to the Court. The presentation would also need to be fairly official to avoid scandal, probably some sort of debut ball. You would be one of many debutantes there,

joining the court in a more political capacity. They would have some advantage on you, because they've been preparing for this their whole lives and you will be older than all of them and stand out because of it. You will, however, be treated much better than if you just appeared among them one day."

"Oh," was all she had to say. "Exactly how intense with this etiquette training be? It can't possibly be that bad."

She received a smirk and Alana replied, "Why don't I teach you some now? Get a head start?"

They spent the rest of the night working on posture while the music from the party continued to drift in and out with the undertones of whispers as people spread about their secrets.

It was exactly that bad.

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Jack was alone.

Currently, he was in the Halamshiral barracks; the Chantry had requested that they did not work there when it involved dead bodies and less corruption. What made the situation so strange was that the regular movement and noise of the city guard was absent. Usually tons of people would be milling about, looking for patrols and arguing about cases. A few would even be gossiping or training, but there was no one.

He moved to where he knew the group would be meeting. Why they would be there, he wasn't sure, but his squad would be there.

The room was space that the barracks used to store contraband, yet they allowed the Seekers to make use of the space. It had a strange clear, ozone smell, like lightning, but not. It stung his nose and made his eyes water. The room was brightly lit, but candles and torches didn't make this kind of light.

"Hello?" the large man asked. He stepped through and knew that he couldn't leave, not now that he had entered. There was a table in the room, perhaps converted from the shelves that once lined the walls. A small part of him asked why this was the contraband room when it looked nothing like it, but it had to be. Such was the way of dreams.

On the table was someone small. Smaller than a human man, at least. As he got closer, the body morphed into something else. There, on the table was an arm.

Jack only just managed to wake himself, with something like dread or grief pitting itself in his stomach. Most days he had what he called a healthy appetite (and Bella called something akin to gluttony with a soft fondness), but ever since he saw what they presumed to be Miriam Lass's arm no food seemed appetizing. Only those feelings ever let him feel full.

Well, those and the letters that he and Bella had been sending back and forth to one another. With the wrongness under his skin, Jack turned over to grab his wife's most recent letters,

filling him with her love rather than his failure.

‘My dearest Jack,

Shortly after I arrived in Val Royeaux, I found that the Empress had left for what was the rest of the winter season. She had, however, left with me a bundle of instructions and the knowledge that Kirkwall needed my services, whether directly or indirectly. Thus, I am currently teaching a very excited young man about his new duties at court...’

‘Husband,

What nonsense are you up to now? You were awfully silly in that last letter, saying the things you did. I’m not as young as I once was, Jack, and we are miles away from one another…’

‘My beloved Jack,

Surely by now, you’ve learned that I’ve been detained in the capital. The weather abruptly turned hostile with all that’s gone on. From what I hear, this whole mess would be a lot less difficult if some upstart Sister would stop trying to antagonize the Qunari force **staying peacefully in the city** . I swear, these religious types sometimes...’

“Jack,

I heard about what happened with Miriam. I’m so sorry, my dear. I remember how important that whole mess was to you and to have it drudged back up with everything going on can’t be good. I know we are far apart, but you should know that I love you dearly...’

‘Darling husband,

I’ve finally sent my student on his way. Hopefully the boat (because it is really a boat dear, not a ship) will reach Kirkwall in time to actually do something about that mess. I know that my not going delayed Orlesian intervention/aid for a good period of time, so I hope that he will be able to do what he can and do it quickly. I should be rejoining you in Halamshiral soon and we can make up for lost time together.

I know that my illness has plagued you greatly these last months, but I am still doing well. For now. I’ve thought extensively about what you said in your last one, and I’ll admit that the thought of dying without seeing you again bothered me so so much. I am considering finding a healer. We can discuss it more when I see you again.

There is so much more that I wish to say and so much more that I wish to do. I know this letter is much shorter than my others, but I am writing this as I wait to join a caravan back to you. I am simply to impatient and had to let you know that I was coming home.

I love you, my sweetest man, and I’ll be with you soon.

Your loving wife,

Bella’

He had to take a few breaths, but after he managed to collect himself, Jack took up a quill and began to write.

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The call came at an unfortunate hour of the morning, otherwise known as too damn early. It came in the form of Jack knocking on the door of his new home and stirring up every single one of his Mabari, now very excited to see a friendly face. The night had been filled with strange images of mirrors only showing shadows and a raven-feathered halla roaming the woods, watching him follow in the night.

‘Dirthamen,’ he prayed. ‘Ghilan’nain. What are you trying to show me?’ He didn’t receive an answer.

Not that he was expecting one.

Bleary-eyed and weary-souled, Will pushed his way through the crowding hounds to allow Jack in, quickly changing into loose clothing and debating about whether he should wear his leathers as well. He very carefully tried not to think about how long it had been since he had worn traditional Dalish robes. Ever since his status as an elf had become more of an issue and he had moved to Halamshiral, Will had been debating going the opposite way and flaunting his ‘otherness’, much like Comte Lecter. It had felt wrong previously, being Clanless, but wouldn’t it be better for him to hold onto that just as much as the rest himself. His thoughts about his heritage had been increasing with rapid frequency after Abigail and the more that he interacted with the world outside of the forests and mountains. Still, better to not do something so drastic now.

He finished changing and joined his boss back in the main room, watching him be mobbed by dogs acting like puppies. His expression was something between amusement and sadness; he didn’t appear to have slept either.

“An invitation in person?” asked Will, still a little snappish.

Jack shrugged, “I was already at the barracks when we got the message about this one. I figured I’d just send each person that way as I moved to the next one. The others will already be there when we arrive.”

“No raven?” he asked, but then glanced outside. It was still pitch dark. “Oh.”

Jack raised an eyebrow, “Exactly.” The larger man moved to wait outside and the dogs bustled to join him, pushing through the door. Will decided to go ahead a put on his leathers (just in case this was a safety issue) and pack up a small bag. The hounds were upset when he had them go back inside, but they wouldn’t be allowed to roam. He asked Crawford to wait while he alerted his nearest neighbor, making sure to pay her for the offer to watch the Mabari. They could be a handful.

The two men, elf and human, made their way out of the Alienage and the lower district and to the upper district of the city. Will rubbed his eyes as they passed by city guards, all of whom looked at the pair curiously before returning to their nightly patrols. Apropos of nothing, Jack

decided to explain the situation to Will: “The victim was found in the bath in a high-end inn. He apparently had requested a second key when he arrived, but no one ever saw a second guest. There was abdominal mutilation and organ removal.”

Will pursed his face at Jack. “I’m assuming you believe this is the Highwayman.”

Jack didn’t answer. “As soon as I found out, I had the guards seal it off. It’s still in the city, so you’re getting it fresh.”

Will snarked sleepily, “Fresh as a daisy.” His words slurred. That bad night had been one of many.

Jack simply looked on. “It’s fresh enough that you’ll be able to tell me if it’s him. Then you can get back to bed.”

He rolled his head. Torchlight was bouncing off the planes of Jack’s face, deepening the shadows under his eyes. His face was menacing in its determination, told him secret that Jack Crawfrd didn’t mean to tell. “You would rather my head wrapped around the Highwayman than back on its pillow. I won’t get sleep until he’s caught.”

“Your bad luck that you’re the best.” They came to a leveling off point, finally in the extravagance that wasn’t boasted by the rest of the city. It was the kind where even the merchants wore their own finery for more than just marketing.

“I guess you’re expecting a few more bodies,” Will presumed.

Jack shook his head, “Only if it’s the Highwayman.”

“Don’t let him stir you up, Jack. He only left you Miriam Lass’s arm so that he could poke you with it.”

“And the rest of her? Why not that?” They were getting closer to the inn. Will could tell by how Jack was acting, going faster, leading Will further. He hurried to maintain pace and rein Jack back in.

“He wanted to humiliate everyone else, but not her. He respected Lass.”

The human gave a smile and a grimace at the same time, twisting his mouth around. “Probably was just impressed that she found him.”

“Was just being practical.” It gave neither of them comfort, nor was it intended to. Jack looked over at Will for the first time during the conversation, but he received the chilling realization that it might not be Will that Jack was seeing.

“He could be starting another cycle. We could have time to catch him.”

“Or we’ll just have two more bodies and nothing to go on,” Will pointed out. “If he’s killing again, he’s not going to be subtle Jack. He decided to let you know about his intentions directly last time. All he has to do is send a note.” He snapped his mouth shut. The last comment was probably unnecessary.

They arrived at the inn, a fancy place done to evoke a farmhouse while keeping the luxurious accommodations befitting Orlesian nobles. It was called “The Wishing Well”, the reason for which became apparent when there was a courtyard past the main interior which had a small well in its center. They were going up the stairs to the room when Jack spoke again: “There **will** be two more bodies and then he’ll stop for months, maybe even years. I get that we could have nothing after all of this, but this is our time. We catch him now or we might not even have another chance.”

The last room on the left looked deceptively unscathed, the unreality of death not touching the outside. Before they entered, he looked directly at Will, “Last time I had a chance, I lost both the Highwayman and Miriam Lass. I can’t afford to lose anything again.” They went inside.

For the most part, the room was untouched except for a significant amount of blood in the room trailing to another door. The room, being one geared for nobility, had an ensuite meant to give privacy while bathing. Following the trail like bread crumbs, they opened the door to reveal the carnage. The bathtub was coated in blood, pooling and congealing around the body; nobody had been willing to empty it while the body still needed to be here. The man, clearly a noble of some means, was leaning back in it, most clothed. His doublet had been ripped open and the chest had also been done in a similar fashion, torn and spread like paper or cloth. Out of his abdomen spilled his guts, held slightly by the bowl of the broken open ribs.

“Has anyone touched the body?” demanded Jack.

Brian, who also looked like he hadn’t had enough sleep, replied, “The locals behaved themselves.”

Jimmy snorted, “Pretty clear the guy is dead. No need to check.”

Beverly shrugged, somehow just looking better than the rest of them even though Will knew she hadn’t been sleeping either. “I touched the body,” she said unrepentantly. “There was evidence of stitching like someone sewed him back up and then tore them back open.” Quietly, Will waved at the three in greeting, since apparently we talked about work before we actually said ‘hello’ now. The other three waved back. Beverly turns to them and said, “Hi Will!” Meanwhile Brian expanded on her comment, “Not just torn open, but clawed open. I found a fingernail and the markings had some scratches on the outside.”

When Jack glared, Brian sheepishly rubbed the back of his head, “I also did a little touching.”

“I didn’t find any needle or thread elsewhere in the room and in case anyone didn’t notice the blood was traveling. If the guy was bleeding on his way into the room, the owner would have reported it,” reminded Jimmy. “Also, I didn’t touch the body.”

“Good job, Jimmy,” said Jack simultaneously with Will’s, “So the stitching was done elsewhere?”

“Was it done by a different person or is he moving them?” asked Beverly.

That got Jimmy's attention again, "If there's a cart or carriage, there's going to be a lot of blood. Honestly, it'd be more convenient if he was doing them inside, but it's unlikely. An accomplice however, is something else entirely."

Will, who had been staring at the sutures, declared, "He clawed them open himself. The victim opened his own sutures."

"Was there something he was trying to get out?" asked Jack.

"Well the guy's missing a kidney," Beverly replied. "Maybe the Highwayman took something else in its place, but removed it after the guy clawed it open and he ripped him open again." She paused for a moment, "Or she."

Jimmy narrowed his eyes, "I'll say he."

Jack was peering over the body when he inquired, "Did he take anything from chest?"

"No," replied Brian. "Well, not exactly. It looks like he was trying to take the heart. Maybe he was interrupted? It's still intact if a little bruised as far as hearts go."

Jack motioned for everybody to leave the room, allowing Will to enter the Realm of Dreams. Alone. Behind him, Will heard, "Why does it gotta be a he, Jimmy?" Then, the door shut.

From a pouch in his bag, Will pulled out some more 'temporary sleeping herbs'. He wouldn't be able to really communicate with the spirits without them. He sat on the floor, cross-legged. The frequent trips in and out of the Fade had made it where he could no longer do this standing up. There was a memorable time where he had tried to enter the Fade for advice from a Wisdom spirit a few weeks ago and woke part-way through after falling on his ass.

A few moments and he dropped off.

Clip-clop. Clip-clop. Clip-clop.

Will glanced to the left where the noise was coming from and saw the Raven-Halla hybrid. It had followed him to this section of the Fade, haunting his brain and sticking to him. If this repeated vision wasn't a message from absent gods, he didn't know how to process it. It enclosed in on him, getting close enough that the halla began to look more like a hart. Was it just Dirthamen then? Was he trying to show Will something that was relevant to Ghilan'nain? It breathed on his face, moistening it with the flare of the nostrils, then it was gone. There was a pressing on his consciousness from behind and Will allowed what was knocking to come in.

He turned and found a still alive, still staggering body. What? That didn't make sense!

He was supposed to be dead! There was no way that the man was still alive!

The man stumbled as he attempted to get closer, trying to make contact and subtly grab the body. There was no way the man was still alive, he must still be dead. A walking corpse. He would need to get him down, stop him from hurting anyone, and also found out why the demon decided that this cadaver would be worth inhabiting.

Was this punishment from the Maker? A sign? His work was too important!

He rushed forward, grabbing the walking corpse and it began to struggle and fight against him. It was too weak to properly fight back, but the tussle was enough to move it to the bathroom. Blood dripped on the floor, spilling from a poor stitching job. He would need to improve on that later.

Maybe it was inside him? He had to get it out!

Frantically, he began to help the corpse rip open the sutures. It was easy, it had gotten them a good deal of the way open. He pulled on the organs, one by one, wrenching them out of the body to find the reason that this one was the one a demon chose. He needed to make sure it didn't happen again.

It could be the heart. Demons were attracted to emotions… Do they scar the heart to keep them after they die? He pulled it out, still attached to the messy workings of a body which was steadily growing cold under his fingers. He didn't notice. Gripping it tightly, he examined the heart for scars, deformities, anything to tell him why.

There was nothing there.

"It's the Highwayman." That was the first thing that Brian said when the rest of the squad was allowed back in.

"It's not," Will shot back, thoroughly not in the mood to argue today. There was something off about this one. The lightning aftertaste was still clinging to his mouth and buzzing through his lungs.

Brian actually looked affronted at Will. They had disagreed plenty of times before, but usually it involved some actual banter or an explanation. Will knew that he hadn't stuck to the rules of the game, but his head hurt too much for him to bother. "There are too many similarities," Brian argued.

"Not enough."

Brian approached the body and gestured around the room. "There are cuts, not stabs. Clearly the killer had some knowledge of the anatomical and surgical or dissecting skills. There is mutilation, organ removal. The victim is still in their clothes and on display. Must I continue?"

Jack remained silent, staring at the body. Will wasn't sure if he wanted the man to chime in. There was a chance that he would push for Brian's point of view and Will knew for a fact that this couldn't be the Highwayman. There was something about the way the room felt, cold and dead. This wasn't artistic or a matter of display… It was frantic. No, desperate. "There aren't enough similarities to connect them," was all Will said.

"There aren't enough similarities? It's him!"

Will shut the door to the washroom, stopping whatever Brian was going to say next. The last thing he saw besides Brian's shocked face was Beverly's smiling one.

"Are you sure?" asked Jack. He was so quiet, it was unlike him.

"More or less."

The Seeker turned to face him now. It was strange to see the imposing man feeling so small or uncertain. Will knew that the Highwayman was a bit of a sore point because of Miram, but he hadn't expected this reaction. "Why are you sure?"

"Every single one of the Highwayman's victims were left in groups of three in cities along the Imperial Highway, it's true, but they also had a certain artistry. Every single one looked like they came from a painting, as terrible as that feels to say. This," Will gesture to the room around. "This feels like someone that doesn't know what they're doing. In the Fade, you could feel the fear under your skin. It's like the person didn't realize that the person was still alive."

He paused, then decided to say what was on his mind, "You'll catch the Highwayman eventually, Jack. I know you will."

The man's face darkened. "I want to catch him now. When I do, you won't have a chance to take him down, because I'm going to take his head clean off his shoulders."

"Jack…" Will protested.

"How do you see him Will? I know you haven't really gotten a good glimpse."

Will tried to gather up all that he had felt when he had seen the notes. "He's a demon in human skin born of human parents. They probably didn't even realize what they were raising. The thing about demons, though, is that they are just doing what's in their nature. The world doesn't make sense to them, so they appear monstrous, but he doesn't. The world exists for him and he can read it like no other. He looks normal, seems normal, and no one can tell the difference."

Jack didn't look reassured. Will didn't feel it.

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Hannibal had come back the previous night to his quarters and stumbled across a slightly tipsy Alana and very tipsy Abigail practicing walking and other ways to negotiate with one's posture. He was slightly disappointed in their behavior, but mostly amused. It wasn't difficult to send them off to bed and prepare for his own day tomorrow. It was going to be very busy after all. This day had started off much better with him enjoying his two companions nursing small headaches, but still prepared to learn and teach. It was during times like these that Hannibal appreciated Alana. She had only accompanied him for Abigail and that was all he needed her for. His friend had become so attached to the girl and her well-being that she was willing to give up a life of sanctuary to keep her safe from the horrors of court.

It was rather kind of her. He wondered how he could use this later.

Unfortunately, Will had only just arrived. He sent a quick summons, hoping to see his friend later that day at some point. Perhaps he could plan it so that Abigail might be there as well? She had told him that before they had left, Will had been pulling away from her. The young elf had been visiting her (and having her visit him) on a near daily basis while he wasn't dealing with crimes, but the visits had become less frequent and some time during the whole affair with Gideon, he had abruptly stopped. It was rather unhelpful.

While the two women left for the kitchens to work on Abigail's comfortability with seating arrangement and dining manners (apparently planning to recruit Nesiraya), a knock came from the main door to the suite. The smell of exactly the wrong kind of perfume, something cheap, and cheese let him know who the person on the other side was.

"Good morning, Lord Froideveaux," Hannibal called as he opened the door. It wouldn't do to upset his neighbor (if one looked at a map, not actually here) after all. "Please come in." The short, rounder man did so without much fanfare.

"It so good to see you Hannibal! And here at Halamshiral? How amazing."

"Not so much," he relied attempting to try and put off the other man gently. "This is my first real event of the year. It was important that I show my face around."

"Mine, too."

Hannibal nodded, "Strangely enough, even though I was positive that you got here much earlier than I."

"Oh, um," Lord Froideveaux reddened. "That may have been on purpose. I knew that it would be your first event when I heard that you had finally arrived. I thought it would be important if someone else who's also experiencing their first event was there too. A person to experience it with."

It was frustrating that this didn't surprise him. Hannibal did not resent the man, not really, but this was striking a nerve. He couldn't do too much though, less he strike one in return. Better to not start a border skirmish when he can't return to defend his own. "That is very true on multiple occasions."

Just as he was about to explain that he had people with him, Lord Froideveaux blurted out, "I was trying to get your attention. Stand within your peripheral vision, but not directly in front of you."

"I was aware." Carefully placed facial expressions, control. He needed to navigate carefully.

The man had the audacity to look hurt. "I knew you were aware, even though you pretended you weren't. If felt like I was being rejected." He was, but now was not the time to explain that to a peer.

“We’re neighbors,” he texted out. “It would be seen as favoritism or plotting between allies. Better to be seen separately and not as a threat.”

“But we could be friends! I want us to be friends! There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Hannibal nodded, a faint tilt of the head. “Of course you do, I have intimate knowledge of you and your affairs. I have aided you on many occasions; if I did anymore I would have to consider formal sponsorship or partnership. While normally there is nothing wrong with being friends, where we are requires a little more caution.” The two men didn’t speak for a moment, but Hannibal decided to gently steer the topic in a different direction. “I’ve come to understand that you’ve been spending a lot of time with Lord Budge.”

The younger noble sighed and sat back, slumping. “He’s my best friend, but I am not his. We have planned outings so many times and so many of them he has cancelled with me. I can’t afford to talk about it with anyone, due to the court having more to gain from allying with him rather than me. I can’t-” He visibly swallowed. “I can’t ask him to be a better friend. He’ll just find another. I can’t vent to anyone, because the servants don’t understand, I don’t have any family, and usually another noble would use it as a way to humiliate me and get in Tobias’s good graces.” When he glanced up, Hannibal noticed that his eyes were tearful. This was really affecting him; admittedly he was endeared by Franklyn’s guilelessness, but sometimes he needed to trust fewer people... Hannibal being one of them. “You’re the only one I can talk to.”

“He is of a higher position than you.”

“And he values one higher. He almost didn’t come to the party last night; Tobias only did after I told him about you.”

Hannibal didn’t see the man at the ball. Why wouldn’t the man engage him if he wished to communicate so badly? “I did not notice him.”

Froideveaux sighed, “He left early. The Dowager cornered him and he no longer felt the need to be there.” Hannibal could sympathize. The Dowager was an excellent and formidable player of the Game, but could sometimes be a bit of a large personality, especially for newer players. It helped that she was the oldest person there, besides the Duke Bastien de Ghislain and a few others of the Council of Heralds (even older than himself).

“Franklyn,” Hannibal replied and the other man looked up hopefully. “I am almost a sponsor. I am an advisor, a source of clarity, not your friend.”

“I’m a great friend,” the younger man short back, but without heat. “I’ve been listening a lot to stories of the Hero of Ferelden, how she lived and died. Her life was so sad and so difficult, my eyes are burning just thinking about it.” He gasped in a short breath, Hannibal could hear the beginning of sobs. “You know what makes it worse? Knowing that I’ll never meet her. I wonder if I had been her friend if I could have saved her. Would she still have gone down fighting or had that last bit of a push to bring her back up? If I couldn’t have done that, could I have at least made her life better? Given her peace?”

A strange notion, considering the fact that the Hero of Ferelden was a city elf from Denerim that would not have welcomed the help of an Orlesian noble in the slightest (at a guess). “How is your friendship returned?” How have you rationalized this Lord Froideveaux? What did he have to gain?

Tears in his eyes, Franklyn only replied, “I just get to touch greatness.”

After visiting with Lord Froideveaux, Hannibal needed to meet an old friend to cleanse his palate. Of course, he had sent a message to Will asking to visit him this evening (and see how the younger man was faring in the city), but this particular meeting was long overdue. When he had first arrived in Orlais, it had taken him a short period of time to get use to its customs and politics. Antiva was far deadlier in its rivalries, but money usually out-weighed everything and if you weren’t a matter of business, most people were willing to leave you be. In Orlais, appearances were everything and assassination was less commonplace. If he were to kill someone here, he was more likely to get arrested. Not that it was entirely acceptable in Antiva, people were just more willing to ignore it if you could spin it as self-defense. Sullying your hands in Orlais would get you shunned at best, unless it was in a public duel. He couldn’t exactly partake in his hobbies there.

The person that had been his fellow student of Orlais was the ever-beautiful Baroness Bedelia du Maurier. Unlike most nobles, she resided Halamshiral year round and was unlikely to leave, ever since the incident that pushed her formally out of the Game. She managed to keep her title by hosting parties where she never appeared except for very briefly, giving her an air of mystery that entranced many of the others. They also left her alone out of pity, which he knew she was very aware of and resented greatly.

If it gave her some peace though, Bedelia would tolerate it. The occasional one on one visits they had also helped both of their reputations. The two mysteries of the Grand Game were friends. People would salivate to know what they got up to.

“Please, come in,” she greeted him as he entered her relatively small home. It was still a rather hefty estate, but as he was currently staying with most of the other nobles in the Winter Palace, it was hard to compare.

The Baroness led him into her private study where a wine bottle was already out and aerating with two glasses beside it. He could tell that it was a red from Rivain by the label, probably named for the infamous Llomerryn sauce. Hannibal joined her in one of the plush cream chairs. The entire study was a display in neutral shades, various whites, greys, browns, creams, and a few dull golds. How she managed to keep it clean with minimal staff was a wonder, even to him. He doubted she did it herself.

“Our conversations always go better if I’m completely honest with you,” Bedelia began, already showing that this would be an interesting conversation. She was rarely honest.

He smiled. “What would be the point otherwise. You and I do not play the Game, not traditionally anyway.” Neither of them wore masks around each other. They were allowed to see each other’s bare faces.

“Well, one of us has to be.” Hmm.

“I’m honest.”

She sipped her wine and glanced at him askew. “Not completely.”

He settled into his seat as she finally sat down, placing the bottle on a small table between them. “As honest as anyone.”

It was her turn to smile. “Not really. We may speak together, but my half of the conversations are with a version of you. I simply hope the actual you gets what he needs or some amusement at the very least.”

“A version of me?” How curious.

“Naturally,” she demurred. “I respect its meticulous construction. You could walk into the Court bare-faced and still have the most intricate mask of all. It is a very well-tailored person suit.”

“I would ask if you call me that with your other friends at Court.”

“But you know very well that I don’t have any other friends,” she replied, narrowing her eyes at him. She did need the reminder sometimes. He was her only real connection to the Game. “I suppose I can see the shape of you, but you’re elegantly obstructed. Perhaps it is less of a suit and more of a veil.”

“Personally I see it as more of a shield.”

The Baroness actually smiled at that. “I’m sure you do. You’re a complicated man, Hannibal. I imagine it must be lonely.” It was a word for it, but he was content.

“I have friends and the opportunities for friends.”

“But they do not see through the veil,” she deduced. “Nor do they seem aware of the veil in the first place.”

Ah. So that’s where this was going. Now that they had reconnected, she was hoping to place pressure on their relationship, define into something more to her liking. How dull, feeding on perceived loneliness to foster understanding. “If you remain on the other side of the veil, why do you bother?”

“I see enough of you to see the truth of you, and I like you. More wine?”

The smell of wine still clung to his clothes by the time that Hannibal made his way back to his suite. Whether or not Will would notice (as neither Abigail nor Alana had) is something else entirely, as Hannibal’s sense of smell tended to be a lot keener than most. It occurred to him that the wine could be a way to facilitate conversation about their relationship. With his move to Halamshiral, everything with Abigail, Alana, Franklyn, and now Bedelia, relationships and intimacy had been on his mind. How does Will see their relationship? Teacher and student? Benefactor and sponsored? Noble and mage?

Now would be a good as time as any to attempt to pry. He pulled out a wine bottle, one of his lighter Tevinter vintages, and two glasses, then placed them in view on his desk. Quickly, he made himself presentable and forewent his mask. It wasn't too much longer when a couple of guards opened the door and escorted the elf in, both watching him warily for any signs of hostility or ill-intent. Hannibal waved them off.

"Friendly bunch," began Will with only the minimal amount of heat.

"Good evening, Will," he replied in lieu of making any kind of comment on the guards or their duty. The walls had ears after all. At least, there was always a chance that they did. Best to not speak ill of the ones protecting them.

The brunette gently walked around the main hub of the suite. Elsewhere in the place, Hannibal knew that Abigail and Alana were trading secrets and learning the art of speaking purely with one's face. He had mastered it years ago and was having Nesiraya work with both of them. Alana was never the best at schooling her emotions. Finally, Will's eyes settled on exactly where the noble wanted them to: the open wine bottle.

"Drinking?"

"Not alone," Hannibal mentioned. "I visited with a peer and we shared a glass of wine."

What might have been a smile flitted across Will's face. "A peer? Very clinical."

He bowed his head. "She and I have known each other for a number of years, both having shared the same patron when we first entered the Game."

"Shouldn't that have made you competitive?"

"Not at all," he clarified. "We've come to support each other repeatedly during our experiences. We might have an unorthodox relationship under the usual boundaries of the Game, but neither she nor I have ever been very conventional." Will's face contorted through confusion, amusement, and sadness. There was something lurking beneath that didn't quite have a name, grasping at the edge of his consciousness, lest it fall. Will left it hanging.

"I suppose my own experience with courtly life isn't conventional," he finally said with some amusement.

"I'd like to think that my sponsorship of you extends beyond conventional boundaries."

"I suppose that is true as well."

"I assure you," he said while he began pouring a glass of wine for himself and for Will. "Drinking while playing the game is very orthodox. How else could we stand one another?" This gave him a smile and Will took a drink, showing his appreciation with a quiet hum.

"You shared a patron?"

Hannibal gave a single nod that seemed to translate to a more elegant bow, if the look on Will's face was anything to go by. "We did. Lady Mantillon took it upon herself to oversee

our introduction to Orlesian courtly society. In retrospect, I wonder if she was at first attempting to convince me to wed her and then changed her mind. If so, I am glad that she did."

"Why?" Will asked, confused.

"Because all of her previous husbands are dead, of course. I believe she just lost her seventh, a 'Renard', tragically poisoned by three glasses of aquae lucidius while partying at Chateau Haine. The first and maybe the second husband are the only ones that potentially were not her doing. She is getting on in her years though; it has now become a game for younger men as they attempt to outlive her."

The shock on Will's face was amusing. He was truly unfamiliar with the way that Orlais worked. "Everyone knows? And no one has said anything?"

"Everyone suspects," he clarified. "There's no evidence and anyone claiming to know without it, regardless of whether everyone is sure that she did it, is going to be shut out and potentially targeted." Will's face didn't seem to take anything in at all. Hannibal exhaled. "I don't appreciate it either, but the rules of the Game dictate. You always want them to suspect you of something to show your threat and power, but you never want them to know for sure."

"And what do they suspect you of doing?" Anything they suspected was nothing close to the truth. Still, better to humor his friend. If he were to say nothing…

"Several affairs and some backstabbing. I mostly get by on others making it an amusement to try and outwit the foreigner and to be either pleasantly surprised or frustrated when it doesn't work. An alliance with the Empress helps."

Will looked down. "I suppose the general suspicion on Abigail will help her at court."

"You are somewhat correct," he replied. "People will invite her to dinners, they will send their daughters to befriend her and their sons to court her, but they will never grow close to her. If she's careful, she can use their uncertainty about her to their advantage."

"You're teaching her?"

He nodded, "Alana and I are."

Will looked like he was thinking about something and couldn't decide how to broach it. "Speak your mind," Hannibal prompted. His mind was a beautiful, fascinating thing and he didn't want to miss a moment.

"What do they think about your association with me? The only elves most people see are their own servants and even then they usually have a human managing their estate as a go-between."

"It is probable that they are chalking it up to foreign peculiarities, a byproduct of being raised in a nation comfortable with magic and having a mage for a guardian at one point." He

smiled, deciding to push the conversation in a way to make Will uncomfortable. “It is also possible that they believe we are having an affair.”

Will gulped and grimaced, Hannibal managing to have caught him while swallowing a mouthful of wine. After a moment of the elf collecting himself, he responded, “Is that what we’re doing?”

“According to the Empress’s handmaidens and at least three nobles I overheard, yes. In hindsight, this meeting will not likely help.” Not that he cared; their rumors amused him.

“Ah.”

“To be fair,” he continued. “We are linked in a way most associate with romance; we have a daughter together.”

Will gestured to Hannibal with his glass, “You mean you and Alana. You two are the ones raising her.”

A tilt, “You always seem to deny or be in denial of your connection with Abigail. You are even going so far as to avoid her, despite the attempts to cultivate one before. Do you have a problem with relationships?”

Will scoffed, “I don’t have many friends, let alone anything as intimate as family.”

He sagely nodded, an imperceptible tilt at a distance of more than six feet. “Understanding why people do what they do doesn’t make it easier to connect with them.” Both of them took a sip.

“Is it easy for you?” asked Will.

“I am a noble in Orlais.”

“So no?”

“I cope.”

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The murder very quickly became the gossip of Halamshiral. Nothing thrills the rich and extravagent more than a murder mystery, many of them found the affair quaint. Will went on at length with Comte Lecter about his frustration when he learned about the next big theory and his irritation when he learned that Freddie Lounds had made her way here to be just as disruptive as ever. His Lordship was a good sport overall, allowing Will to vent.

In only a few short days, there was another one. He had been found outside of a local brothel, on a bench near several fountains. The victim was lying supine over it, one half on one side, the other draping down to the stones that made up the side of the streets. The spinal column was lying over the seat of the bench, connecting the two halves together, the false and floating ribs broken off to surround the guts laid on top. It was an arresting sight. Will was surprised at the lack of vomit surrounding the area; the smell alone was putrid.

Brian looked at him accusingly as Will approached. “You slammed that door in my face.”

“It was more of a gentle swing,” he snarked back. He tried to keep it fairly good-natured, but there was a chance that it came across as more defiant or defensive, especially with the body lying only a few yards away. It seemed that the whole group was trying to ignore it and some were more successful than others.

“It actually was fairly gentle,” Jimmy remarked agreeably. His coming into the potential fight pushed some of the anger out of Brian. The dark-haired man snorted and returned to his examination.

“I am glad that you’re here actually,” Brian continued, voice still tight. “As you can see, not only did the Highwayman take this man’s kidneys, but the heart as well, much as he was trying to do at the inn.” He glanced back at Will, throwing him a meaningful look. “He was interrupted, which is why he couldn’t put up his display.”

Will shot it down, “The Highwayman wasn’t in that inn. That crime had nothing in common with his previous crimes other than missing organs.”

Brian scoffed and turned away, leaving Beverly to take his place, “Well, if it wasn't the last time, it definitely is here.”

“Yes,” Will answered absently, but his mind was tracing over his own last few words.

It was possible… Perhaps? It might make sense, given the circumstances. “I wonder… When I was there, he thought they were already dead, even thought the guy was a walking corpse, he was desperate for their organs, and there was something off about the whole encounter.” Will turned to the others, “It felt odd. Is it possible that he requires the organs somehow? Is he using them for something?” Will didn’t mention that the more he thought about the feeling, the more familiar it felt.

Brian paused for a moment before nodding, “They were kept most intact by the looks of it. Our killer was careful of damaging the area around the organ if nothing else. The Highwayman is roughly the same way as well though!”

Who needs organs? Who is desperate for them? It’s not like they can be exchanged, those attempts have always killed people, even when magic was involved. They could be used in rituals, but the killer would have been able to realize the first victim wasn’t a walking corpse if he had the arcane knowledge. Could be eating them too, but there are very low odds of that being the case and, if so, why not take more?

Did he have the arcane knowledge? One didn’t need to know about magic to read from a book and prepare a ritual. You also didn’t have to be magic yourself to attempt it, but it usually requires some sort of power source. It is someone well-read, someone desperate. Their essence feels wrong in the Fade, like the spirit was trying to translate something in another language. They need organs…

No. They need body parts.

“We need a list of people that have recently died. The person will be well-read and would have had access to books on the arcane, but not be a mage. There is a good chance that they knew our first victim, Monsieur…”

He didn’t actually know the first victim’s name. It hadn’t come up or he didn’t remember.

“Philip Caldwell,” chimed in Beverly.

“Monsieur Caldwell. There is a good chance that Monsieur Caldwell was near death himself when our friend interacted with him so that he could contact or connect with him better. That or the two knew each other in life.”

Jack smiled at him, “Thus him asking for two keys. Monsieur Caldwell didn’t realize his friend was dead.”

Will looked down, “This one isn’t our friend though. You were right to call him the Highwayman. The question is if this one realizes that a ghost is perpetrating crimes similar to his and is capitalizing on it or if they just happen to have adjacent time frames.”

“Are you alright, Will?” Beverly asked him later. They had both left the barracks and were currently resting in his abode; she wasn’t ready to go back to her family just yet. She had said something about them being a little overbearing, which part of him knew was a half-truth. Besides, this was her family, the one that she hadn’t seen in a long while. If it was his Clan… Well, that was a bad example.

One of the dogs, Blossom, was curled up on top of his feet and resting comfortably, her little stubby tail wiggling from side to side on occasion, moving her butt along with it. Everytime Beverly glanced over at it, she burst in a fit of giggles, which made Blossom wag her tail harder.

“I’m just thinking about the weird feeling from the Fade experience,” he replied, a half-truth. It was on his mind, but the feeling it had granted him was forcing him to think about other things: Home.

“What exactly about it?” his friend asked idly while pressing some of his herbs into a leather-bound book. He had given her permission when he found out she was trying to collect as many rare plants as she could. She said it was a way to collect her adventures, a log of every place that she’s ever been.

He was thinking about a place that he had been. “The feeling, I’ve felt it before actually. At the edge of the Exalted Plains in the Dales, there was a graveyard for ancient elves. They were tombs really, settled in the base of a tree. I had just started living on my own, roaming aimlessly, and saw Dalish symbols on the stones. The presence of something familiar encouraged me to camp during the night, but half-way through it I awoke. There were moving figures scrambling beneath trees, transparent. I couldn’t tell if they were ghosts, spirits, demons, or something else entirely. A couple of them looked like they still had body parts, which convinced me that it was a bunch of demons possessing corpses. I packed my things then and there and left.”

“And the feeling?”

“I woke up with it. Must have slept deep enough to enter the Fade and feel alongside them.”

They sat in silence for a moment before Beverly asked the question that he knew she would. He knew she would as soon as the mentioning crossed his lips. “Why did you leave exactly?”

Will sighed. He needed to learn to keep his mouth shut apparently. “I told you. It’s the rule of-”

“The rule of three mages, I know. We’ve already established that you were the First though, your Keeper’s right hand. I’ve asked around and there’s no way they would have gotten rid of you; you were to be the next person to lead the Clan. They’re way more likely to get rid of the Second or even the new mage no matter their age, if they have to get rid of anyone at all.”

“I volunteered.”

Neither of them spoke. She was trying to give him space to speak and choose his words, now that she had prompted the conversation. He could tell. When he felt ready to speak: “I am a Somniari. Do you know what that is?” Beverly shook her head. “It’s a mage that is completely aware of their dreams in the Fade. Most mages only experience that kind of control if they are experiencing their Harrowing. Unfortunately, that kind of awareness brings power which attracts demons. My kind, they don’t tend to live long. They either go mad, neglect themselves, become possessed, or resort to suicide to escape. Somniari die young.”

The half-elf let him speak, actively listening to his words. There was so much that could also tell her, about food they would hunt together, the lullabies their People sang, but that isn’t what she’d want to hear right now. “We didn’t find out I was a Somniari until I was already well into my duties as a First. I had always had an affinity for spirits, which no one liked, but they were willing to leave well-enough alone. After they found out, most were convinced that it was only a matter of time before I became possessed and tried to murder the rest of the Clan. By the time the new mage had awoken, I was well aware that everyone wanted me gone. Most Clans don’t actually follow the rule of three, or they at least bend it a little to allow four. If not that, they immediately work to find a Clan where there isn’t a mage. Plenty of Clans only have the Keeper and the First. My Clan was worried about keeping another mage; they already had enough to worry about with me. The Hahren were debating what to do and the Second and I were listening in as part of our leadership training. The solution seemed obvious, everyone was thinking it. I simply offered. The next morning I left with a pack of food and some basic supplies, and I haven’t seen them since.”

“What Clan were you a part of?”

“Lavellan,” Will replied, throwing some treats to his dogs. Watching them play and eat underfoot always made him feel better.

“I could try and track them down,” Beverly offered, but he waved it away.

“No. That would just be putting them on the Seekers’ radar and Dalish Clans pride themselves on being largely unfound unless they want to be. I’d rather not put them at risk.

Besides, I don't want to see them anyway," he grumbled.

She stared at him, hard. "I think you do. You've been bemoaning the fact that we haven't spent any time together, but as soon as we do you start asking me why I'm not spending time with my family and telling me that I shouldn't take them for granted."

"It's not about them."

"Then what's it about?"

He was going to have to say it. "I've been thinking about Abigail. I was trying to teach her and be better than her birth father, but a huge part of me wants to share my culture with her, to adopt her into it, but…"

"But," Beverly continued for him and he was so so very grateful, "she's human. Humans took away Arlathan and the Old Ways and many of them enslaved our People. I get that." Of course she would. "How many people do you think were welcoming of me?" she asked him. "I'm a 'round ear'. I basically look human. Even some of the other parents in the Alienage were asking my mom to leave or at least have some nice human family adopt me. It didn't matter that my dad had saved my mom's life or that he even tried to live in the Alienage and use his privilege to give the other elves a fair chance where they didn't get one. It didn't matter that prior to that they were all living together and there hadn't been a difference. Suddenly my parents wanted to raise their child as an elf and a lot of people took exception."

"I just don't know what to do," Will groaned.

"Look," she said. "If you're so worried about teaching Abigail your culture and her not being an elf, you could always teach her about Avvar culture."

That made him pause. "I am… technically an Avvar."

"You were initiated."

"I was initiated."

Beverly shrugged, "I recognize that it's not as much of your identity as being Dalish, even without a Clan, but it's still a part of you. This won't solve your problem forever, but at least this you can share. Who knows? Maybe you'll find a Clan that you can ask for permission."

He gave Blossom and Winston a few scritches. Winston rolled onto his back and begged for belly scratches, which he promptly received. "That's not my only issue."

"Course it isn't. You wouldn't be Will if it was."

He glared. She smiled. Neither of them felt truly bothered.

"I'm also worried about affecting her badly. The whole thing with the Lost Dreamer worried me."

Beverly placed a hand on his shoulder and tried to make her smile as comforting as possible, “You may be a Dreamer, Will, but you’re not lost. If you let something like that hold you hostage, you’re never going to be there for her. Your absence will linger until you are a ghost in her life yourself.”

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Nesiraya had taken Abigail down to the kitchens in disguise to teach her a few of the quieter and more subtle versions of the Game. His spymaster had insisted that she be the one to guide Abigail through this particular exploration, considering that he was far more noticeable and it had been some time since Alana had engaged in the practice. The nuances of being a Bard and participating in that lifestyle should come easy to the girl, considering what he believed of her history with her father. Nesiraya was right, of course, he would stand out. All of the servants knew who he was. While that was extremely helpful in some situations, for this particular lesson it would not be.

This left him up in the suite for the day. Alana had been a bit of a shut in since agreeing to come with him to Halamshiral, staying resolutely by Abigail’s side. She was a strong advocate of the girl and had been carefully imparting all knowledge that could think of. However, she was reluctant to actually participate herself and had not gone out with Hannibal at any point. Part of the reason that he had pushed for Abigail’s lessons to occur the way they did today was for him to be alone with his peer and friend.

Alana was sitting on the window settee, gazing out onto the grounds of the Winter Palace. The trees had begun to blossom, tiny fragile flowers. She would look wonderful among them, surrounded by her name-sake, painted in red with roses and blood.

Now was simply not the time, and he respected her too much to even try. Besides, he needed her to teach Abigail about court and their expectations for her, while he taught her something far more important. That, and he could not dedicate all of his time to her at this moment, what with his project with Will being what it was.

He approached her with a smile, “I’ve been unspeakably rude, your Ladyship. I have yet to offer you a drink.” Procuring some ale that he been brewing specifically for his companion, Hannibal approached her.

She smiled, tucking her feet out of sight under her dress. It was cold this morning, and while the fire was going in the room, its warmth had yet to permeate it. “You know that appreciate ale more than wine.”

He offered up the ale, “A compromise? Ale brewed in a wine barrel.”

The ex-Sister smiled and took a couple of sips. She hummed, tasting it for a moment, before returning his offer, “Flames of Our Lady?”

“I love your palate.”

Another sip. “I also taste oak and… honey? There’s something else.”

He grinned, enjoying the test. If she actually knew what else was in there, there would be no way she would react like this. It was always amusing, watching people enjoy the forbidden and forsworn. “I will only answer yes or no questions.” She sighed, faking disappointment, but continued to drink.

“Will this be at your dinner party?” Ah, she had heard.

“No, this is only for you. A private reserve.”

“My own private reserve?” he was surprised that she seemed genuinely shocked. Alana was also clearly a bit flattered. He should continue to cultivate that, it would prove useful later. “Thank you.”

“Of course, I expect a sous-chef in exchange.”

“It would be my honor.”

Now to bring about an important conversation. One they had been avoiding for a while. “In all the time that you’ve been here, you’ve spoken about Abigail and her studies at great length. We’ve revisited your move back into politics, discussed your family and how they’ve been trying to reach you, the incident with Abel Gideon, your former suitor, and your feelings about the Chantry after what happened with him. We have not, however, discussed Will. Are you avoiding the subject on purpose?”

She hummed, “Absolutely.”

“I hope it’s not on my account. I’m happy to get your perspective, I am sponsoring him after all.”

The brunette scoffed, “It’s on Jack Crawford’s account. After everything that happened with Gideon, I find myself no longer comforted by the idea that a Seeker has Will’s back. He and I talked about how the man reacted to the whole incident and even an inkling that Gideon might have been the Highwayman. They’re working on a case now where the Highwayman’s involvement is suspected and Jack is running him ragged.”

He didn’t say anything; Alana didn’t look like she was finished. “Garrett Hobbs was Will’s trial run. All of the killers since were practices for what Jack really wants. I’m worried that he’s been grooming Will to catch the Highwayman; his obsession is getting in the way of Will’s well-being.” It was and it would continue. He was torn between the idea of someone finally seeing him or maintaining his anonymity. Perhaps he could fully get Will to understand who and what he was before the man began to suspect anything. He had time for the moment thanks to whatever was affecting him and the strange reluctance of the spirits to divulge his secrets, but it wouldn’t stay that way forever.

Alana continued, “I understand why Jack feels the way he does. He was already grieving for Miriam and this will continue, but pushing Will off with him is helping no one. I’m not so sure that he and his crew can count on the higher-ups either. Something very wrong is happening among the Seekers and the Chantry.”

“Well, I have a hard time resenting them for pushing you away at the moment. It’s brought us closer together. Many thought we were having an affair and that your leaving had less to do with your parents and more with a fallout between you and I.”

A snort. “I’m sure they were only too happy to encourage those rumors. Better that than have parents that were displeased when their daughter was having an affair with another woman of lesser standing. As long as I have an heir, no one in Orlais cares.” She sighed for a moment and then playfully glared at him. “Will does that too, you know.”

“Hmm?”

“Flirtatiously change the subject. You have that in common.”

A similarity. “Or we just have you in common? I did find in strange that even when we were in communication during your sabbatical, you never spoke of him.”

She put down the glass, ale finished and stood up. The sounds of Nesiraya and Abigail returning brought both of them back. “Probably because I just want everyone to leave him be,” she said while she smoothed down her skirt. The two of them prepared for an eager young woman to tell them what she learned.

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When Hannibal had told her that she would be spending the day with Nesiraya in the kitchens, Abigail felt a bit abandoned. She knew that he would be attempting to ‘talk’ with Alana about her situation and was resentful of the sheer number of times that people thought she appreciated having all of her decisions made for her. A young woman she may be, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t want any say in the path her life was taking.

Sadly, there was little doubt that her say would be decreasing before the day was done.

She and Nesiraya had been gradually coming to get used to one another. The older elven woman was strangely severe, but in a calming way. Apparently, she had several children that probably no longer remembered their mother’s face (that was a guess on her part, not directly stated) and a partner she once would have called a husband (these were Nesiraya’s words). The woman left very little room for error in her expectations, but plenty for curiosity. Nesiraya had a policy of allowing any question to be asked at any time an unlimited number of times, but failure to fully attempt to do something meant she would be given more tasks. By tasks, Abigail means chores. A kitchen meant to feed a hundred plus people also meant a **lot** of cleaning.

After she scrubbed every pot for what must have been the fifth time, Abigail threw down her greasy rag. “I’m tired of this,” huffed she as she attempted to abandon the black-haired elf to her duties. A strong hand grabbed her upper arm; it felt like a bruise even though the grip applied only a small amount of pressure. Up she looked into the dark eyes of Nesiraya who seemed less than pleased. “Tired of what?” came the question, which could have been concerned coming from someone else. The tone sounded too much like a challenge.

Honesty came out of her mouth before she could force it back in. “I’m tired of this nonsense. I wish I could go home. I wish I didn’t have to skulk and hide around the halls of the Winter Palace. I wish Will would stop avoiding me. I wish everything could be normal.” The young woman looked back to the pots stacked nearby. “And I wish I didn’t have to scrub another pot.”

Her teacher smirked and threw her own rag down. “I was wondering when you were going to lose patience.” This was on purpose?

“Of course! If you were just some girl that went benignly on with whatever I said, I would be concerned on your survival in the Game and disinterested in you as a student.” She hadn’t realized that she had said it out loud. “Besides,” Nesiraya continued. “It’s good to vent your feelings. You’ve been bottling a lot up and that can be difficult on anyone.”

Her teacher was supposed to be showing her the ways of being enigmatic and mysterious, a spy among spies. This wasn’t what she had been expecting. “How is this supposed to help me be a bard?”

“The best bards are at peace with themselves and the world around them. It’s true that many have tragic backstories and have some way of unhealthy coping, but those tend to overextend themselves and die young. Many people say, ‘Trust no one in Orlais’, but if you don’t find a way to keep yourself healthy, you might as well stick a dagger in your heart.”

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The barracks were empty.-

This time he couldn’t place them; maybe they were Halamshiral’s, maybe they were Red Crossings, but they had the bland uniform look that all barracks seem to have. The common space where the patrols were posted and they played games when not on duty was curiously empty. A faint tinkling reached his ears as it echoed through the expanded halls, ceilings vaulted higher and wider than he had ever seen in a military building. Jack followed the noise, hoping to find its source. It was important that he found its source.

It led to the dining hall. The room was elongated and unkempt, looking like everyone had gotten up and left in the middle of dinner. The tables held only the decaying remains of meals scattered across them. All except for one.

There was a shape under a blanket which looked unmistakably like a body. The shroud draped across it blurred the shape and he was unable to tell what kind of person was underneath: old, young, man, woman, human, non-human. The folds separated a curious lump on top of the blanket from the body. Tucked between them was a locket.

He snatched his hand back, but the need to know remained. Before he could stop it, a swift hand flipped back the shroud, revealing the figure underneath.

It was a young elf man, brunette curls and the slightest scruff. Cloudy blue eyes opened and stared, accusingly. Idly Jack wondered if that was because he had killed him. Had he killed him?

The figure sat up and the drape fell back onto the table, slipping to the ground. The chest was cut down the middle, a clean slice that opened and released its organs on its lap, spilling further to the floor. Empty eyes stared, not allowing Jack to look away or deny what he was seeing.

It only had one arm.

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It had barely been a week since the whole matter began, but the five of them were currently in a room filled with six or seven bodies from five different displays. They had all been gradually more gory, but Will had told Jack which ones he believed were the Highwayman and which one's were their ghost, but he had the others confer as well. It appeared that there were several different reasons that Will could tell the difference between a ghost and a spirit.

"It's how it feels when I go in, less like a dream and more like a memory of a dream," Will said, which only made the rest of them more confused. Will sighed. "A Spirit is will made manifest in the Fade. A Ghost is a memory made manifest in the Fade. Spirits are autonomous beings with personality and goals. They can play back memories as if they were there or experiencing them and they are called into will by a strong presence of a particular aspect, but the memory thing and remaining with what called them is their choice. Ghosts don't have one."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Beverly.

"Remember when I explained Veilfire to you?" Will asked.

Brian grumbled back, "You said it was the memory of fire. Something about its intensity called the Fade to keep it preserved in the Realm of Dreams."

"Yes. It usually has to do with the Veil being thin in that area, a strong presence of lyrium, being in a location where there was once a powerful ritual, or something like that. Ghosts are the same way. Some sort of magic happened which left the **memory** of the person there. The important distinction is that they are no longer a person, they are storage for their last thoughts or actions and continue acting in a manner befitting their nature. Ghosts have no personality or goals; they've become a force. Whatever was the last thing on that person's mind is what's left of them, no matter how out of character or in character it is."

It had cleared some things up for Jack. He would admit that he was a little confused previously about mentions of spirits and ghosts in the same breath, especially because ghosts were usually scary stories friends told each other.

No matter. Another body had dropped and they needed to get this figured out sooner rather than later.

"They're all missing different organs," was how Jack was greeted when he walked in the door. Jimmy never failed at making sure to find the most dramatic or inconvenient timing whenever he decided to reveal pertinent information to a case. Once, he had made sure to describe the process of a particular blood magic ritual in excruciating detail while the rest of

them were trying to eat. Jimmy had made sure to finish his meal early, and that was definitely on purpose by the way he smiled through it the whole time.

Jack realized that he had stopped paying attention, “Sorry.”

Thankfully, Jimmy didn’t take it personally. “They’re all missing different organs. We’ve got (or don’t got rather) missing hearts, kidneys, livers, stomachs, pancreases, lungs, and one is even missing a spleen.”

“This seems odd. The not-Highwayman thinks that the people that he killed are already dead. He’s desperate for the organs, but why would he be taking them?” Beverly asked.

“We did kind of stop there last time,” Brian acquiesced.

Will rolled his eyes when a couple of them looked at him. “I’m not a diviner.”

Beverly shrugged, “Does anybody have any ideas?”

“Eating them?”

“Collecting them?”

“Making a new body?”

All of his squad was silent for a moment. It was really strange to hear something like that allowed, no matter how strange its source could usually be anyway.

“That’s fucked up, Will.”

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The court of Halamshiral gathered in the small banquet hall, some moving about the vestibule of the Palace to interact with each other quietly, even though the room was full of noise. Whispers undercut the roar of laughter and dining, people faking genuine interest while spying out of the corners of their eyes. Secret words spoken between the lines of running scripts. Thus was the way of the Game.

At the moment, he was enjoying fine Orlesian cheese (and steering clear of the Fereldan which was purely there for the daring or those ready to be humiliated) and a glass of wine. Mingling was an aspect of life and while this wasn’t a formal event by any means that didn’t make it any less important to the slow movements of politics. Sometimes these were even more important; it is all about how you conduct yourself informally.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hannibal noticed some poor unfortunate falling for the lure of the Fereldan cheeses. A small turn revealed said unfortunate to be none other than Lord Froideveaux. At a respectful distance away stood a taller, darker, and fitter man. He was watching Lord Froideveaux who was… watching Hannibal.

And now Franklyn was making his way over to him. Delightful.

“Good afternoon,” he greeted both gentlemen.

“Good afternoon to you as well,” chimed in Franklyn, echoed by his vigilant companion.

On his plate sat the Fereldan cheese, damning him in the eyes of other nobles, while Lord Froideveaux chattered away at him, oblivious. His companion was not, but clearly wasn’t saying anything. Poor Lord Froideveaux, unaware that his ‘friend’ would so casually doom him to social suicide. “It’s so good to see you again! Most certainly it has been a busy week,” Franklyn kept on. “I know that you weren’t able to visit me or invite me over with your new charge staying with you, but hopefully we can fix that soon.”

The taller man stared at Hannibal over Lord Froideveaux’s shoulder. Hannibal attempted to subtly convey to Franklyn that he should introduce him to his companion. It seemed that subtler intricacies of social grace were lost on him. “I love Fereldan cheese! When I was a lad, I hated it. I was lucky enough that my true introduction to it came from a maid that taught me about tyromancy; Do you know what that is?”

“Divination by cheese,” Hannibal replied. Seeing as subtle wasn’t working as well as he hoped, he was now outright staring at the man behind Franklyn.

“I knew we were both cheese-folk!” Lord Froideveaux exclaimed. Several nobles startled from where they had been listening in. Finally, he recognized what Hannibal was trying to tell him with his eyebrows. “Oh! This is Lord Tobias Budge.” He then leaned forward conspiratorially, “He doesn’t eat dairy.”

“Lord Budge,” Hannibal created, maintaining decorum with a slight bow. His counterpart bowed back. “Comte Lecter.”

“You didn’t notice, but he could barely take his eyes off you; honestly, I thought he was watching the cheese at first,” Lord Budge joked, but the voice only just managed to not be monotone. Neither of his masks were very well-made.

Hannibal gave what approximated as a chortle, “I will simply have to pay more attention next time.”

Lord Budge grinned, “My apologies that I wasn’t able to introduce myself properly at the previous party. I’m afraid that urgent business matters pulled me elsewhere.” As if summoned by his words, several nobles pushed in slightly, attempting to be as unobtrusive as possible. “And so it begins,” the man declared as he sauntered off with potential partners. Lord Froideveaux had been standing awkwardly between the two while they talked and was watching the other man as he left.

“You care deeply about Lord Budge, despite your differences. He’s your best friend, but you’re not his,” Hannibal concluded aloud.

“I know I said it before, but Maker is it sad when you say it like that,” came the reply.

“You came to me last speaking of friendship, yet crave both my attention and his,” cut Hannibal, without mercy. After Budge left, many people left. Actual business that affected

the Game was more important than watching a little noble humiliate himself. It was just the two of them, isolated by the wall do sycophants and leeches. “Do you often worry about being alone?”

There was so much sadness in Franklyn’s eyes. “I often worry about hurting.” He turned to Hannibal, “Being alone has such a dull ache to it, doesn’t it?”

It can, he thought but did not reply. Instead, Hannibal simply walked away.

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Hannibal had eagerly (for him) asked Alana to attend the small gathering that was occurring that day, but she honestly wasn’t feeling up to it. The isolation felt better than a crowded room. The dinner party that she had hosted had been enough social interaction; she felt like she understood Will a little bit better now. The lot of them were exhausting. She had forgotten why she had left the court in the first place and it was abruptly coming back to her. Sure the affair with Margot had been the catalyst, but this was the important lead up.

She may not have been adjusting to courtly life, but Abigail seemed to be. Granted the young woman had not had to actually interact with anyone yet, but her lessons had been going exceedingly well with all three of them. Alana, Nesiraya, and Hannibal were not going easy on her either; that wouldn’t help her adjust the world around her. The older human woman worried about the younger one much of the time; while many didn’t realize it, this was a hard and dangerous life to live, and Abigail only had a few months to learn when most her age had thirteen years or more. She was also going to be much older than most debutantes by several years, which was going to make the introduction difficult.

The brunette was sitting on a small lounge near the window, bare feet curled under as she continued to try and read her book. Unfortunately, the pressing thoughts were distracting her from the latest chapter of Varric Tethras’ sordid tale. *Swords and Shields* wasn’t a particularly well-written romance serial. It was clear that the man was more used to writing action stories than romantic literature.

While she was absorbed in not reading the serial, foot-steps sounded from around her and someone set themselves down on the other side of the lounge. Nesiraya’s dark eyes glanced at her book and the elven woman smiled. “What part are you on? Have the Knight-Captain and the guardsmen met again?” Alana raised an eyebrow and the other woman chuckled. “I’m allowed to read smutty literature as well.”

The two women stretches out slightly in an attempt to relax. “Clearly you weren’t paying that much attention. Your eyes were on the page, but they weren’t reading.”

Alana sighed, “No, my thoughts are elsewhere.”

Nesiraya nodded, “Abigail.”

“Of course. I’m not happy that we’re showing her the ways of the Grand Game and Orlais. It’s a life full of fear and deceit. She’ll probably have to become ruthless to survive and I

don't look forward to that. Sure, she'll have better opportunities here than a little village in the Dales or a wanderer from town to town, but I still worry."

A strange look crossed the other woman's face transformed into a grimace. "If you have such hatred for Orlais and the Game, why leave the Chantry? You could easily have requested that the two of you simply change cities. If it was a matter of staying near Hannibal and thus the Seekers, you could simply have to come Halamshiral that way."

"You've met Will?" Nesiraya nodded.

"There was an incident with an old suitor of mine," she shook her head. "We were never close and I definitely didn't want to marry him. I cared for someone else at the time, but my parents knew that to keep our line we needed heirs and political power. This suitor would have provided both," Alana tried to keep the disgust out of her voice. "He was a Seeker and while at a Circle, he murdered many of the mages and Templars there. The Seekers take care of their own so the sequestered him away. My parents immediately began looking for another suitor, despite my protests, and made a deal with my lover's parents to keep me away from her. It's why I left."

Nesiraya replied, "I will never understand nobility and culture's need to carry on bloodlines. Both of those things are perfectly able to be exchanged socially." Alana shrugged.

"I was happy with the Chantry. Nobody bothered me and nobody cared. I even had a few lovers during my time away, although they were always short and fleeting."

"Then why leave?"

"Corruption," Alana stated sadly. She cast her eyes down. "The incident I mentioned? Will was part of the investigation team going into it. He is still alive, managed to kill someone in the Bastion d'Argent. Will found some notes in the High Seeker's study that claimed he was doing things to his mind, trying to change him into someone or something else. Not just that, but Will and I looked into them and some of the notes suggest that Lord Seeker Prurnell sanctioned the experiment. We couldn't find definitive proof, but…"

Nesiraya looked affronted, even slightly angry. "And you just left?"

"I couldn't stay a part of that system," justified Alana. "The Seekers are the Chantry's way to root out corruption! How do they do that when they are corrupt themselves?"

The elf crossed their invisible boundary on the lounge, leaning close to Alana. "Why not root out the corruption yourself?"

That was strange. Why would an elven servant and bard say something like that? As far as politics to engage in, she would be much better off in Ferelden or a few of the Free Marcher city-states. Corruption in Orlais was so much worse and, if centuries of history taught them anything, was there from the beginning and nearly unremovable. "Rooting out corruption? That's not exactly an easy thing to do. I'd have to get an appointment with the Divine and find evidence."

Rolling her eyes, Nesiraya declared, “Not if you do it from the inside.”

“The inside? Are you saying I should rejoin the Chantry?”

Her companion shrugged, “Maybe not as a Sister. Why not try your luck with the Seekers themselves? They pull from Chantry folk. Usually they’re Templars, but if we start training you in combat, perhaps we can convince Seeker Crawford to put you in. He might even be willing to work with you if you explain yourself.”

Alana looked at her dubiously, “You sound as if you have experience.”

“I’m a spymaster in Orlais; I see bad things all of the time. While I primarily aid Hannibal, he’s actually allowed me to pursue my own interests at Court. I’m what’s known as a Friend of Red Jenny and I usually help take down or at least reduce power of the more abusive nobles. They use masks and I rip them of their faces. You can deny the Seekers of Truth theirs as well.”

“That works?” asked Alana. If this worked with Orlais, wouldn’t it be good for her to try. Nesiraya nodded and a strong feeling of hope and excitement began to fill her. She could do this.

“Where do I start?”

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Nesiraya’s advice had been fairly helpful. Of course, it was followed up with intense hand-to-hand combat training, but it had left Abigail thinking hard about what she wanted from life and how to live without regrets. At least, it helped to live without the unhealthy kind. This left the young woman with a healthy appreciation for the dagger and how difficult simply talking through problems could be. After every one of the training sessions, she sat down with her teacher and simply talked. There was still so much that she couldn’t say, couldn’t share, but sitting and talking with the elven woman for a while allowed her to explain her grief about her mother and her father’s legacy, her worry about Will and how he had begun ignoring her after she asked about Dalish culture, and her anxiety about being somewhere new.

When she asked how the older woman was able to sit and listen to all of her problems, Nesiraya had simply replied that she had taught many bards and spies this way. At first, she had used her active listening to get people to reveal their secrets for later usage or to convince them to do what she wanted, but eventually she found that some people became so much better after several talks and working on reflective thought. Abigail wondered if she was lying and if this was really a ploy to get her to do what Nesiraya wanted. The woman had only replied that her skepticism would let her go far.

She still wasn’t sure.

After this session, Abigail had taken a nice, hot bath (still a wonderful and appreciated luxury), which Nesiraya had made her draw herself, and enjoyed some tea in the main room of the suite. Alana had been with her for a while, but disappeared off to who knows where.

Hannibal had gone at some sort of function all day. There was a moment she had thought about practicing some forms, but the soreness had remained from that morning's training remained. Admittedly, she was also feeling a bit lazy. Just as she was getting settled with one of Alana's books, a knock came from the door.

A quick glance around revealed that there were no servants nearby and that Abigail and Alana were both truly gone. Nesiraya was missing as well, which was odd because until today the woman had been rather careful about not leaving her by herself. She suspected that it was with Hannibal's direction. The knock continued.

Because no one else either could or was going to answer it, Abigail headed to the door and opened it. Behind it was a now frantic looking Will.

"Will," she greeted and attempted to keep her voice warm.

"Uh, hi Abigail," he returned. His voice was shaky and slightly nervous, now that her presence had startled him. "Is Hannibal here?"

"He's out at the moment. Would you like to sit down? I can make some tea for you," she offered, wanting to take this opportunity to corner him or to spend time with him.

"I'm sorry," he replied. "It was a bit of urgent business that I needed to take care of, but if he's not here I should go." The older brunette immediately backtracked away from the door and started to leave.

"Will!" she called out fully expecting him to go.

He stopped.

"Please come by and visit soon," Abigail requested, hoping that he would agree. Will nodded and left her standing in the doorway. It wouldn't be long before some guards or servants ushered her back inside, but she stayed there until they returned, hoping that Will would come back. It was strange enough for her to admit to herself, but she missed the man who killed her father. He had seen something light in her, thought of her as pure. Alana still saw her as a victim of circumstance and Hannibal had seen her kill, but Will was there and he had rescued her. He had seen something worth saving and, for a while, teaching. A part of her still wished for that, too.

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Abigail and Will sat side by side in his home. It was good to see her there, with him again, even though this ramshackle little shack was much less homey than the one in Red Crossing. It might just be him though, after all that one was in the forest. They smiled at each other and it occurred to him that this was the first time he had really seen her smile. The younger brunette always seemed sad and even if she smiled it was tinted by that sadness. Another thing they had in common then.

He tended the food for her, thanking Sylaise for providing the hearth and home, for protecting this girl he saw as almost his child. Her fire burned bright between them and lit up

the room, even as twilight was falling and darkening the outside world. Here, it was just the two of them, both trying to find comfort in the flickering flames and warmth.

Abigail's smile saddened and she looked up with big blue eyes. "Dad…"

"Yes?" he replied, trying to keep his voice joyful. Maybe it would help her pain go away?

"There's someone else here," she said and the clicking of hooves filled his senses, accompanied by the strong scent of perfume.

"Will?" he heard a voice say. It was masculine and decidedly not Abigail's. "Will?" it called again and he looked around to find himself still in the shack, but with no fire and no Abigail. His Mabari were huddled against him and each other for warmth and sharp raps were coming from the door to his little house.

It took a moment, but Will managed to push his hounds off of him and start a small fire with some practical magic that he learned when he was much younger. He would never be able to use the flame for combat, but it made cooking easier. He opened the door to see, much to his surprise, Comte Lecter there. A quick glance outside past him saw no bodyguards and many elves that lived in the far edge of the Alienage with him were blatantly staring at the door where a noble was visiting their newest member. "Will!" his Lordship greeted warmly, which made Will's coldness more apparent, both physically and socially. "I heard that you came to visit me in the Winter Palace. I'm sorry that I wasn't able to see you, but when I learned I decided to come straight here."

The elf shot a couple of looks at the gawkers and ushered his Lordship inside, very aware that he was either going to be shunned or pestered come the morrow. "My apologies, your Lordship," he answered. "I didn't feel comfortable simply waiting around the Winter Palace for you."

"No apologies necessary," said the noble. "Although I was slightly concerned when it took you ten minutes to open the door. I did peer in a window to see how you were and you seemed alive."

"I seemed alive?"

Comte Lecter looked slightly upset, "You weren't present. Your eyes were open, staring into the air at nothing, but you were breathing. Each exhale left a fog. If I had to wait much longer, I would have asked someone to break down the door, but that seemed like a poor response, especially considering the neighborhood."

Fair. If a noble was seen breaking into an elf's house that might send the wrong idea about either one of them. Not that this particular stunt helped at all, but at least it didn't look like he was being arrested or that Comte Lecter was going to drag him out kicking and screaming. No, instead it would look like Will was doing something illegal for his Lordship, probably thievery or some sort of magic (as most people here knew he was a mage). "Thank you for not resorting to those measures. Honestly, I believe I fell asleep." He gestured for the man to sit at his shoddy table before he noticed that the notes Jack gave him about the Highwayman

murders and the most recent spate were all across it. He winced when he noticed that the Comte had seen them.

“I see why. With these images filling your head, your sleep must not be very restful.”

“What else can you see?” asked Will as the man continued to peruse with a sense of detachment. The noble actually seemed interested in a non-morbid way (although that was never a guarantee with Comte Lecter; the man’s face was stone).

“You wish for me to describe something like this?” the noble asked back, then he cautioned, “Describing this is going to be difficult. Words are living things. They have personality, point of view, agenda.”

“And they often work together for the betterment or detriment of the whole sentence,” concluded Will. “They’re pack hunters.” The older man seemed delighted.

“It’s very natural for hunters to wish to display their skills. The kills and spoils of a prey worth stalking. Is that what this one is doing?”

“Not prey so much,” Will said as he felt out the words, rolling them in his mouth to check the flavor. “There would be a sense of conquering or satisfaction. The Highwayman’s kills are more irritants, pests that he’s swatted.”

If anything that made the Comte more excited. Perhaps he was a morbid curiosity type of noble after all. The man was from Nevarra, a nation known for its fascination with death and all of its trappings. “A reward for their cruelty?”

“No,” Will pushed out. The flavor was rancid, acidic and foul. “He’s not bothered by cruelty. It’s a public shaming, more a reward for undignified behavior. He’s disgracing them.”

This gave the older man pause and he looked at Will out of the corner of his eye, as if hesitating. “What about Jack Crawford’s protégé?”

It figures that Comte Lecter would hesitate talking about Miriam Lass. It rode the border of speaking ill of the dead and trying a genuine investigation. Will answered as honestly as he could, “She wasn’t like the others. He had no reason to humiliate Miriam Lass.”

His nostrils flared in amusement, too quiet to be a laugh, “It seems to me like he was trying to humiliate someone.”

“Jack Crawford,” Will replied and said nothing more. He didn’t need to.

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“And you think that seeing if the University of Orlais has anything on this weird ancient elvhen graveyard will somehow help us find our killer?”

Beverly shrugged. Jack sometimes had a way of boiling everything someone said down to its simplest point and making it sound absolutely ludicrous. She was used to trying to bypass it by now. “You make it sound like I’m taking a huge leap of faith! We have no clue what

‘ghost’ it is or how they’re choosing their victims! Will talked to me before the spate got bad and then it seemed to cross his mind later when we were examining them. If there was a burial ground with spirits having partial bodies, would it not make sense for someone that saw it in life to try it in death?”

Jack just stared at her.

“Jack! We have absolutely nothing else to go on! It will not hurt us to see if the University of Orlais knows anything about someone studying ancient elvhen burial sites. If nothing else, then we at least know who to ask for information later.”

He sighed and began drafting the letter with only, “We have much to actually lose here if this goes wrong, but you’re right. Any hurt this causes will hurt much less than if we didn’t take the chance at all.”

His acquiescence had her grin triumphantly as she plopped down on the desk nearby. Her boss took a minute to collect his thoughts before he finished penning the letter and called for someone to get him a messenger bird.

“So you’ve been talking with Will,” Jack asked more than stated.

“Yeah,” she replied, trying to gauge what exactly Jack wanted to talk about. He slumped slightly in his seat and pushed back to stretch out his pent up energy.

“I think I may be pushing him too much,” Jack softly declared. He seemed to be shamed, but was trying to take some semblance of responsibility.

“I certainly think that you’re pushing him. I don’t know about too much.” A few weeks ago, Beverly would have been certain, but Will was strong. He frequently proved to her that he could manage himself and any attempts at coddling were met with a teeny bit of hostility. Offers of unwanted help were seen as an affront, something that suggested that he was a danger or in danger. Perhaps if he wasn’t a mage, let alone a Somniari, Will would have been less defensive, but he was. It was a moot point.

Will had yet to give her any reason that he was even close to reaching ‘too much’. Jack was thinking otherwise. “Why are you worried?” Beverly asked his guilt-ridden face. “Sure, yes. You’ve been pushing him. Honestly I think that with sufficient support, Will can handle himself. He’s an adult Jack.”

“I’m holding him hostage!” the man said with a rising tone.

She recognized this pattern; the words coming out of his mouth. She had been with him for two years, longer than two years. This was as much about Will as it wasn’t and Jack was trying his best to ignore that. “Jack,” she began. “Will isn’t Miriam. You know he isn’t. A phylactery hasn’t been taken yet; he’s a smart young man. If he really **really** wanted to go, he would. I’m not saying that he doesn’t feel stuck or trapped. That’s his mind and I can’t say I know him well enough to act like I’m reading it, but you’re ignoring the simple fact that he is his own person.”

Will isn't Miriam. He should have recognized the thoughts as they were coming, the guilt as it was happening. Someone notified them that a bird was waiting outside for them, so the two departed the office. Their footsteps echoed down the halls, placing the steps up and down it. As they walked towards what would be a potential lead or absolute nonsense, they passed through the mess. For a brief instant, Jack thought he saw a vaguely humanoid body setting on one of the tables draped in white cloth.

He kept walking.

It took two days before they managed to receive word from the University of Orlais and their resolution came in the form of the travel plans of Philip Caldwell, the first victim. Apparently, Monsieur Caldwell was a student at the University and went on a trip to ancient elvhen burial sites in the Exalted Plains with his servant (and once upon a time playmate) Devon Silvestri. Reports stated that Sillvestri often attended class with Monsieur Caldwell and even took notes for him. They had gone to study biological differences in ancient elves as compared to contemporary elves, but Caldwell had come back early without research or his servant.

He hadn't wanted to talk about it with anyone, but did tell the Silvestri family that their son had died. He refused to say how.

It was around this time that they also received reports that near several of the murders, witnesses spotted a plain wooden carriage with minimal design. The innkeeper from the first murder mentioned (when questioned again) a similar description when talking about how Caldwell arrived. Apparently the carriage had dropped him off and pulled off. Perhaps it was because Silvestri was finding a place to put it. This was Orlais, particularly Halamshiral. Carriages weren't plain. They were intricately decorated, occasionally gaudy.

Jack sent out a report to let all of the guards know what they were to keep an eye out for, while Beverly gathered the rest of the team from holiday. It wasn't hard to find Brian or Jimmy, both had stuck around the Chantry, but Will was purposely being an elusive little shit. Eventually she caught up with him and let him know the news:

They were going hunting.

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It took a while to find the carriage in question; unlike most smaller cities, where there were only a few, the abundance of the rich had them filling the streets. No noble or merchant wanted to be caught dead actually walking in direct sunlight or open air, not unless it was on a veranda, on a balcony, or in a courtyard. At least, not wearing their public face and finery.

The carriage was small and unobtrusive, plain as to keep it from being noticed, which is exactly why they noticed it. All and any of the others had something ostentatious or decadent about them, whether tasteful or not. Most of them had some form of heraldry emblazoned on them to identify them if they were stolen. Will noticed that Comte Lecter was politely turning up his nose at a few. Whether about the actual style of the carriage or the person that he knew that owned it, Will couldn't tell.

It was sitting near an inn, one of the less populated in town thanks to reports by a rival of pests. The actual inn seemed fairly beautiful, if a bit deserted. If the owner didn't get a few customers soon, it would probably go out of business. Will had a feeling that Hannibal would call it "just the way of the Game".

The squad and a few carefully selected guardsmen surrounded the transport as Jack approached one of the side doors. The windows on them had been carefully covered up with curtains, which gave them the advantage. No one was prepared for what they found inside. A body, no more than twenty-two years of age in life, was propped up inside, ribs burst open with skin flaps draped against the sides. Shiny organs were sitting inside the darkness of the abdominal cavity as veins and arteries moved to reconnect themselves. Once the door opened, everything stopped.

A tense moment, while they all waited for something to happen. Then, the carriage started to rock. Back and forth it swing from side to side, tilting towards the party and away. The cadaver slid from the seat and down into the floor, congealing blood that someone had just poured into it spilling out as it rocked. Will stepped forward and no one attempted to bring him back.

A few Seekers were attempting to use their natural magic negation abilities, but the ghost in the carriage was another beast. He warily held out a prepared ritual that he had worked on when he found out that it was a ghost. It was a difficult undertaking that would only be useful in this particular circumstance and he could only hope that his new spell would finish it off the way it was supposed to. The elf began to chant in elvhen, invoking words meant to soothe and placate, but also to untangle. All the while ,he was trying to cast a complicated form of a spell designed to remove magical effects from the area. He was trying to locate what Silvestri's memory would be attached to when his memory imprinted onto this world.

Objects began flying everywhere, anything that would have been contained in the carriage. There was a kit that looked like it hadn't been touched in weeks, molding along the bottom of the bag. A pick axe rushed past along with several instruments that he knew were designed to dissect. Forceps flung themselves at his head and Jack Crawford rushed forward with a shield and deflected them in time.

Will remained still. With Jack guarding him to block any incoming attacks, he felt his concentration deepen. He saw something, a figure in the carriage; its shape was indistinct, but it might've been a young man. Two eyes, red and sad, looked up at him, begging. *I just wanted to live* came to him, more than a memory. It was a plea. A tug came from his awareness of the carriage and, instinct prepared before intellect, Will released the spell.

Everything stopped.

They all held their breaths as they waited for something to happen. A few moments passed and there was nothing. Will glanced back at the rest of the group and all four of them smiled. Hannibal even dipped his head in encouragement and he felt himself smiling back, despite how wrong it felt on his face. How undeserved this small bit of kindness was. Jack patted him on the back, "Good job, Will."

It didn't feel like a good job.

Was he wrong?

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To see another aspect of Will's gifts in motion was beautiful. Hannibal had never really considered the idea that the younger man's connection with spirits could be used for understanding ghosts as well. The dead were very different from living embodiments of emotion, but Will's consciousness existed in a much different way than that of those around him; it only made sense that he could connect with things others could not. It's a pity that the Seekers and Templars could only understand the most surface parts of what Somniari could do. Will was more an asset than he was truly a liability.

If Hannibal could cultivate that…

The day after the incident with Monsieur Silvestri, Hannibal found himself finally using his preserved organs and prepared a beautiful dinner party for an elite number of the court of Halamshiral. It would not be too ostentation; he needed to let the nobles bring their guard down before it would become impolite to refuse his invitations. That did not mean that he wouldn't be incorporating his own ingredients. Naturally, Alana, Bedelia, Lady Mantillon, and Empress Celene I were invited. Bedelia, once again, politely declined the invitation, but the others had confirmed their attendance. It was a modest size for a private affair, no more than twenty people in total. The Comte had invited Will as well and was surprised when the elf did arrive. Unfortunately, he was informed that Will wouldn't be staying.

"You would be surprised how many people enjoy eating with blood. In some parts of the world, it is considered a mark of an excellent chef if they manage to work the food around the often strong flavor." He flourished the bowl, working the sauce thoroughly. "Llomeryn Red is named partially as such for the alcohol as it is for the color remind diners distinctly of blood. I've modified the sauce to better reflect the meal and allow my guests a taste. Druffalo blood is hard to preserve and worse to work with, but I've managed it before." His Lordship quickly placed aside his utensils on a clean surface and the sauce off to a sous chef so that they could continue stirring. It wouldn't do to let the blood settle after all. "Are you sure I can't convince you to stay?" he said, addressing Will directly.

Will looked down, holding the wine delicately, as if his grip could cause the bottle to shatter. "I don't think I would be good company," he explained. "I also don't enjoy the thought of being an exotic showpiece for them to gawk at."

"I disagree and you are hardly a simple novelty, but I concede your point," as much as he didn't want to. He would love for Will to be at a dinner party and enjoy his company, but it was true that all of his guests would probably stare at the elf all night and wonder at his attendance there. A small part of him did want to show Will off, to exclaim the fact that this unique young man was in his grasp, but most of the nobles of Halamshiral would not read or understand his gesture. If they did, there was a high chance that they would attempt to poach Will in some way, and that would not do. Time to change the subject.

Hannibal hummed. "I must say, when I told you that I was curious about spirituality, this is not exactly what I meant."

This startled a laugh out of Will, his face scrunched up and confused about his amusement. “I suppose it wouldn’t be. Sorry, I wasn’t expecting you to make a joke.”

The noble would not admit it to anyone else, but he did pout slightly. No one else would actually notice, but the part of his brain that told him to rein in his face tighter would not leave it alone. “I can be quite witty when I wish to be.”

“And how long have you been sitting on that?”

He admitted, “Since I learned that your Highwayman was a ghost.”

Will frowned. “He wasn’t the Highwayman, much as Jack would like. He knows that Monsieur Silvestri wasn’t though and isn’t about to let me off this one, not with the real Highwayman joining in on the fun.”

“Is it Highwayman or Highwaymen?”

“Highwayman,” Will conferred.

“And there was?”

“No connection,” came the flat reply. Will rubbed his eyes idly with one hand and held out the wine by the bottle’s neck. Quickly, Hannibal grabbed it and placed it carefully on the counter, politely relaying his gratitude. A Sun Blonde? Very fine vintage from Tevinter and fairly expensive. Where did Will get the money for this?

The elf sighed and rubbed both eyes with both hands this time, clearly staving off another headache. Hannibal wondered if Will had been using the tincture as he had suggested. “I apologize,” Will began. “I really do have to be somewhere. Jack has me checking over notes and sketches, probably will be until our little friend is caught. It appears I have a date with the Highwayman.”

How frustrating and amusing at the same time.

Eventually…

The food was finished, the crowd was gathered. Twenty smiling faces applauded and cheered as his servants whisked around the extended dining table he had acquired and had brought to the Winter Palace for these specific circumstances. He knew that, in her room, Abigail was listening to the host of people embrace his cuisine and revel in their culture. Hopefully, she would be among them soon. Celene had told him that before the season was over, she would make sure to host the debut.

The plates were placed in front of the guests while twenty servants, some borrowed from Celene to supplement his inability to serve each individual guest, began plating up food. Unlike most dinners that these guests had experienced, no one would be leaving the table throughout the dinner. It would be extremely rude.

Finally, as the plates were full and the applauding continued, cheers of “bravissimo” rising among them, Hannibal raised his hand to silence his guests. Every single one stopped, waiting for his words to begin their festivities.

“Before we begin, you must all be warned.” He smiled, watching as they hung on his every word. “Nothing here is vegetarian.” A few chuckles.

“Bon appetit.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed it!
Your comments are the blood that fuels my writing magic.

Aneth ara, lethallen

Chapter Notes

08/31/24: Not yet edited

Aneth ara, lethallen: Hello (said in a way meant for close Dalish to one another), dear/friend (a gender neutral term of endearment for a close friend or loved one) Note: If the term lethallan is used, the gender for the term is masculine. If it changes to lethallin, the gender also changes to feminine.

I'm putting of few more than usual of my writer's notes at the end this time, due to spoiler territory. If you're confused about some changes to what's going on, please see that.

This chapter was pretty difficult to write and I'm very behind in my writing schedule. I'm currently working to rectify that, but I'll keep you posted. I now have a tumblr (I still ask myself why), which I will be using to give you guys updates on this project and maybe put up some of my art (when it gets done). I'm champion-of-thedas there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The forest remained dark in the Arbor Wilds. He had not meant to wander so far into the deep, but his efforts to get away from the Clan had led him there. Idly, Will supposed that dying in the Wilds meant that his body would at least be among the trees. It wasn't exactly being planted with a cedar branch or planting a tree on top of him, but it was close enough. A small way that he could remain among the People, even if it meant his death.

The trees around him climbed to the sky and the roots and thick trunks took up whole clearings and arched overhead. It would be uncomfortable, but he could see a few divots where he could make a small bed. A strange bird with bright and colorful feathers squawked at him as he passed it by. He wouldn't be able to climb it anyway; the young elf hadn't eaten in a week. The food had run out a while and he hadn't hunted since he left the Clan. At first, he simply was too shocked to actually do it, and then he was too clumsy to properly stalk any game. It didn't seem worth it to try anymore.

A particularly nasty root tripped him and he fell face-first in the muddy dirt. He could tell that it was good and fertile soil and, because of this, didn't bother to move. Here he would lay and his remains would feed the plants around, letting them grow and live.

Moist breath hit the back of his neck and he tried to ignore it. The inhale and exhale remained constant, so Will reached behind and swatted at whatever was doing it. If it was a predator, so be it. If it wasn't, hopefully it would go away.

It didn't go away and it didn't try and eat him. Will turned his head, running the muck all over him, to look at the intruder.

A halla's nostrils flexed with its breathing. It took him a second to realize that it wasn't a stag or hart and another second to realize what else made it abnormal. The horns twisted around its head in strange and aimless directions, not the straight spirals that halla were known for. The halla also was covered in black raven's feathers, no glimpse of white, downy fur peering from underneath.

It was undeniably a halla though and it nudged him to get up, so he did.

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It had only been four days since Hannibal's dinner party (five since the incident in question) and the ghost of Silvestri had already become the gossip of the entire court. The fact that Hannibal had been there only made everyone frantic to get a chance to speak with him on the matter. Everyone was asking about what it was like to encounter one, how he felt working with the Seekers of Truth, and, most importantly, they were asking about Will. Alana had noticed that Will had been keeping more to himself since the encounter. It had her slightly worried, but Hannibal and Abigail kept her occupied.

That and Celene had been doing her part as well. She had been throwing balls with increasing frequency trying to encourage people to push their patronage to the arts. She greatly appreciated the work that Celene had put towards embracing and promoting art and culture during her reign, very unlike her predecessor. Her Radiance had also asked how she was doing and made sure that Hannibal was treating her well. It was rather intimidating to have the Empress of Orlais actually take an interest in her.

The morning after one such ball had left Alana in a distinctly pleased mood. The pleasant weight of wine and smiles had filled her night and the presence of Hannibal at her side made her feel fearless. There was a reason he was such a good player of the Game and it had only taken a few conversations to get back into the swing of things. The thrust and riposte of dialogue had been something that she had forgotten that she missed. The corruption and the petty squabbles that remained as the undercurrent she could still do without. The rules and the power grabs were still frustrating as the Void itself, but finding the perfect witticism to bring down an uptight, upstart noble was a tremendous amount of fun.

Abigail admitted some jealousy on her part, but was still congratulatory. She knew that the girl would be on her way to joining her soon; she had been advancing faster than many her age thrown into this situation. Hopefully, those skills would not fail her when she experienced the real thing.

Alana started her day with some tea and a croissant. She felt like she could eat more, but lighter fare would suit her better for the day. Hannibal insisted that she start attending more gatherings and put her face out their more else she end up a social recluse and mocked for it. Re-entering the Game required that you show yourself to be an adept and eager player rather than Baroness du Maurier. How the woman managed to maintain her power was always a mystery to Alana, even after Hannibal had bothered to explain it. The way some nobles

handed out exceptions and unspoken rules was ridiculous. Wonderful, a reminder of why she left.

A brush of her hand against the plate alerted her that there was a paper of sorts under it. Alana lifted the plate and pulled out a thick scroll of parchment tied tightly with a blue ribbon There was a wax seal of a flower opening to the viewer: her family's crest.

A message from her parents?

The brunette found a pair of scissors and cut the ribbon before unrolling the scroll and reading what her family had bothered to send her. She did not like what she read.

The gist was rather simple. Her parents, the esteemed Baron Betrand and Baroness Odette Bloom de Serault, were ecstatic to hear that their daughter had rejoined the nobility and was engaging in the Game on a level that they hadn't seen while she was still with them. They were wishing her well and hoping she would visit them soon. They had met a young man, apparently a de Launcet, that they thought she should meet. Her parents went to great lengths to explain the family's influence and many relatives throughout Thedas and how beneficial it would be to their family if she and this young man were to get to know each other.

Alana threw the scroll in the fire before she even finished it. She needed to vent to someone, someone that was irritated about the Game just as much as she was in that moment. It was strange, to love something this morning and to hate it now, but her parents had managed to remind her of her leaving. It was as if this morning was designed to break the high of last night and the 'Lady Bloom' needed to cleanse her palate of it.

Luckily, she knew the perfect person to do it.

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Very carefully, Will attached the feathers to the arrow; this would be spending the last of the silk thread that he kept from his time with his Clan. Careful placement was key here. Will was never much on a hunter, but he always enjoyed working with his hands. Before his magic, the crafter of the Clan wanted to take him on as an apprentice. That didn't last long though.

Carefully, he applied a few decorations beyond the initial feathers. Usually, this wasn't done. Arrows were meant to be used and hunted with, but he was never much of a hunter. Honestly, Will was better at fishing when he put his mind to it. Fletching calmed him, allowed him to reminisce the world around him and think less about the monsters lurking in his brain, the real and the metaphorical. All of it with a piece of home.

A piece of home in his new home. After the dream last night, he needed it. It had been a long time since Will had thought about his time alone in the forests after leaving Clan Lavellan. It wasn't long after when he dream took place that the Avvar found him, but it had been hard. Luckily, he wasn't alone now. His Mabari surrounded him, some pressed against his side and some against his legs as he concentrated on a particularly delicate part. The gentle movement of some milling about and playing added a rhythm to concentrate on, their hindquarters

wiggling back and forth in lieu of tails. If they did have more than stubby nubs, no doubt half the stuff in the room would be knocked over.

He had just finished tying a fairly difficult knot when a shriek came from outside. It was the distinct sound of a dog in pain. Will glanced around the room at his hounds, checking each one over for injury or sign of pain.

There was none.

A quick flash of a moment and the sound came again, louder this time. The elf got up and checked outside, hoping to find any hint of the noise. There weren't any other hounds or dogs in the Alienage; most of them didn't have the coin to take care of themselves let alone a pet. The others had had one too many bad encounters with coursers and didn't feel comfortable around them. For those, he left his dogs inside or talked with them to find their limits before forcing an encounter.

Many of them actually seemed fine with his Mabari. It was probably because Orlesian nobility as a rule didn't have anything to do with them. He still checked.

The sound happened again, off to his left. Will moved to go around the hovel to the back, hoping to find an animal there. Instead, he found Alana, who was apparently coming around the side of his home. His friend appeared happy, but he could sense that something was off.

"Will!" she greeted. "I was hoping to catch you here! I was just popping in for a visit."

A quick glance around showed that no one had seemed to notice her, probably thanks to her fairly nondescript clothing. He ushered her inside, pleading that no one else noticed the very out-of-place human.

It didn't take long for Will to convince Alana to wear a hat to hide her ears. There wasn't much to be done about it; someone with rounded ears travelling through the Alienage would make his neighbors nervous and no one would trust him after. He didn't relish the idea of someone bestowing him the moniker of "flat-ear".

The two of them walked around the Alienage; Will had explained what he was doing outside in plain clothes to Alana and she agreed to help him look for the source of the pained cries. What wasn't helpful was that after the two of them set out, the noise had stopped.

Using what he remembered of the encounter, Will directed his friend towards the source of the sound. Alana trailed behind him, entranced by the Vhenadhal and the people floating from stall to stall. The Alienage didn't exactly have a thriving market, but many people had crafts that they would trade and Will noticed they still engaged in Vir Sulevanin.

A couple of turns and they still hadn't found it. Alana was watching him quizzically as they moved past the 'boundary' that served as the edge of the Alienage proper and began walking out to the farmlands. A few humans and elves that were tending the fields eyed them as they passed, but seeing as neither of them were traipsing across the land or trying to steal, they were left alone. "Alana," Will started, knowing that there had to be a reason for her to visit. They hadn't talked properly in about a month; letters didn't count. He said as much.

The other brunette sighed and stepped over a prominent root before she explained, “I received a letter from my parents.”

“Oh.” That was really all he could say. Granted, he could start spouting about how her parents were terrible users, that they were manipulative assholes, etc. etc. The problem was that Alana already knew that and already knew how to deal with them. She just needed to vent sometimes; they all did really. So he remained quiet.

She kicked a rock. “I’m so frustrated with them. They tried to push me into a position to marry and made it so that the girl I loved wouldn’t be able to see me again. I’ve been away for years, secluded in a Chantry as far away from the Game as I could make it, and just because I come back they think they can push me right back to what made me leave.” She inhaled deeply to keep herself from shouting. “They talk about power and influence as if they are things needed to keep breathing. I enjoyed playing the Game to a degree, but it was the challenge and never the reward. I grew up watching their marriage and how they only spoke together if it involved business or politics. I don’t want a marriage like that. I want to love.”

He gently patted her back, “I know. I’m sorry that you have to deal with them.”

She made a disgusted noise, “I knew I was going to have to, I guess. Mostly, I was just trying to pretend it wasn’t going to happen. If I wished hard enough, they would just go away.” The light from the trees hit her to burnish her hair with the sun. Alana was beautiful, Will knew that. Also, she was way out of his league and a human. It wasn’t going to happen. Of course, he also happened to be surrounded by beautiful people which made this so difficult. His head was already a messy place and he didn’t need to add the drama of love alongside it.

Still, he teased, “So you’re a romantic…”

She scoffed and smiled brightly, “I simply swoon in the presence of a good Dame or Ser. Poetry and a bottle of wine and I’m done for.”

“Oh, fair damsel of the garden; Arlessa of honeysuckle and rose,” he began and she shoved him. “I humbly beg your gracious pardon; For the offense that here arose.” He did a mockery of a bow.

“Will!”

“Surely your work is far too vital; To be interrupted by one like me,” he laughed out. “I am in no way entitled; To earn the notice of a honeybee!” Will was practically heaving at the end, wheezing between words. Alana looked delighted and embarrassed, playfully shoving his shoulder. He opened his mouth to continue and she shoved her hand over it. It felt good to make her laugh, especially with how terrible the morning had apparently been for her.

“Honestly, I’m surprised,” he admitted when she removed the hand. “I would never have taken you for a romantic.”

“What did you take me for?” He shrugged.

“I guess I never thought about it. Well, maybe once, but once upon a time when I may have had a thing for you, but not much anymore.”

She laughed and at his offended look explained herself, “Sorry, it just doesn’t seem like you court.”

“Too broken?” he asked back.

“No,” she paused and a sly grin spread across her face. “Too elfy.”

He snorted, “Too elfy? What is that supposed to mean?”

“Too elfy! Stuck in the past. Or is that too magey?”

“You make no sense.” She shrugged. “Well I have a lot going on. Things happening. Stuff like that that prevents me from getting out there. What’s your excuse?”

“You’re assuming I don’t?”

“I’ve never seen you,” Will pointed out. “Do you?”

Alana tilted her head back and forth, “I had a few lovers while I was a Lay Sister. It was nothing serious, but we all parted on good terms. I’ll be honest though, I prefer something a little more natural. Something that just happens, you know? The aggressive pursuit feels like it’s for someone else. If I try, I end up thinking too much.”

He nodded, “Hard to put yourself out there if you notice everything you do and know why they do it. Makes it difficult to want to pursue them. If it just happens, you’ve already noticed those things and accept them for it.”

“Exactly,” Alana said and then stopped after Will abruptly ceased movement. He stared into the underbrush and looked back to the Alienage. He hadn’t realized how far out they had gone and there was still no sign of the animal. He looked back to Alana who looked very concerned. “Do you see something Will?”

“No,” he replied, beginning to feel slightly distressed. He tried to rationalize it to himself: there were plenty of reasons he might not see tracks and there were plenty of places the animal could have gone to. “Let’s head back,” Will said to Alana and the two made their way back to his home.

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The last few days had been relatively slow, so Jack was in his current place of residence attempting to look over the notes the Guard-Captain had given him. The Seeker had actually gone over the guard barracks and asked for anything to help with, this quiet was killing him slowly. He managed to visit all of his squad a few times, but they were either busy with their own things or greedily grabbing for as much privacy as possible (in the case of Will). They hardly ever got any chances to rest anymore, so he happily allowed them their time. Each of them had sought him out at one point or another to check on him, which did help a lot.

This place was so quiet. The nobles were still in full swing, despite the season for Halamshiral being over. The fact that the Empress was not going to return to Val Royeaux for a few more months probably kept them here. Part of him craved their absence, but the rest was happy for the noise that they made. He attributed the silence to the party that had gone on the night before. Most of the nobility had decided to drink, sing, and dance rowdily, a new and foreign sight.

Maybe the restlessness had caused them to abandon inhibition, the same restlessness that took him away from the notes now. Had he simply been infected with it late? It felt like an end or a beginning. Something was happening and he didn't like it.

Brooding had never done him any good before and he was immensely lucky that this very moment was interrupted by the door opening. Old instincts tried to get him to grab his sword, but once he saw who it was, he was immensely grateful he hadn't.

Bella looked up at him and smiled, brushing off the dust and weather from her riding clothes. Quickly, he rushed to his wife's aid, helping her remove her cloak and armored outerwear so that she could get into something much more comfortable. Once she was suitably ready for the indoors, the two embraced.

"Bella," he sighed into her hair. She had let it down from the bun while it was just the two of them. "I'm so happy to see you."

"And I you, Jack," she replied as she smiled against his cheek. They stood there and held each other, basking in the presence of their love. Too long had they been apart.

Together, they stood back. "How was saving the nation, my dear?" Jack asked as he walked to the lounge. They couldn't bear to let go, so they remained connected with their hands. When he sat, she sat with him.

Bella smiled and brushed her hair away with her free hand, "The new boy is a fresh face, but he'll be okay. I'm slightly worried that he won't make it though. Kirkwall is a ways away."

"He has plenty of time," Jack assured his wife.

"How have you been?" she returned.

He sighed, "Restless, but no longer with you here."

She playfully shoved his shoulder, "Charmer!"

"You mean charmed," he teased back. "I swear if you had the magic to enthrall a person, I would be under your spell and happily so." She smiled and it took the age and stress off her face. Marks of ill health remained, but it only made him love her more. He always had been attracted to her strength, even if it could be frustrating sometimes. A gentle caress and they both released what little tension was in their bodies.

"Jack," Bella breathed out. "I might be up to seeing a healer."

A shock of relief went through him. Jack tried his best to keep the joy out of his voice, “We’ll do whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“I know there are a couple of traveling mages in Halamshiral. Madame de Fer had always been a favorite of the Empress. I might ask her for a recommendation.” She looked slightly hesitant. “If I do, I want to withdraw from politics for a while.”

“Of course, my dear,” Jack said. “If you don’t feel like engaging in any more politics, I’m sure the Empress herself would work it out for you. You have been her loyal ambassador for many years, afterall.” He kissed her cheek and they embraced, joy at reuniting filling his being. “For the record,” he teased. “I think that you would have knocked them in Kirkwall all dead.” That made her smile and laugh, which only made the day even better.

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“I have a lot of respect for you, as a peer, and for the way you play the Game,” said Lord Froideveaux while the two of them enjoyed brunch together. It was overall light fare that came from Hannibal’s own kitchen, hunted himself and all. The other man continued, “You rightly pointed out that if we were seen as friends, others would interpret it as an alliance, but why would that be a bad thing? I understand if you’re not comfortable with that.” He sighed, putting down the silverware in favor of resting his head in his hands. “My only real friend is Tobias.” He paused and then quickly corrected himself, “I mean Lord Budge. He has been worrying me as of late though. I suspect the worst and it leaves me concerned.”

“Suspect the worst?” asked Hannibal, bored but hoping for something to intrigue him.

“I’ve been doing what you do!” He sincerely doubted that. “I’ve been observing people to try and understand them. I’ve noticed that’s what you do when you go to parties.”

Strangely observant, if slightly skewed in the wrong direction. “That’s very insightful of you.”

Franklyn looked distant for a moment. “Once I figured that out, I tried to do it. Look at myself through your eyes. It helped me to get to know myself.” Hannibal remained quiet to let the other noble finish his incomplete thought. “I decided to eventually try it on others, hoping it would lend me more understanding.”

“Of whom?”

“The people I know. Myself. You. But I tried it out on Tobias and what I thought was a bit… worrying.”

Hannibal decided to try for a more patient and coaxing approach. The man was clearly hesitant to speak on whatever was bothering him. “What was worrying?”

“Well, I decided to observe him, because he’s been acting a bit odd lately. He’ll be minding his own business and then blurt out some very dark and disturbing things. Then, he’ll smile and say, ‘Just kidding!” Franklyn waved his hands around. “It was so out of place with what I knew of him that I decided to try and pay more attention. He disappears for extensive hours,

hardly appears to sleep, watches other people strangely. It's starting to paint a very strange picture."

"Do you suspect that he's done something wrong?"

The other lord threw his hands up in the air, "I don't know what I suspect. Do I think my friend may be involved in something bad? Yes. I'm not sure what though." He hung his head in his hands, "Maybe we should talk about something else. I'm sure this is annoying."

"Not at all," Hannibal replied. This was the most interesting Franklyn had ever been.

Franklyn picked up on what he meant by that. "Are you bored with me?" he accused. The man's face was too soft to properly convey 'glaring daggers', but he was clearly trying.

"I am not," Hannibal lied. "I am simply trying to help you."

Sighing Franklyn sat back in the plush chair, "I really just want to talk this out with someone- get a second opinion on his behavior."

"It wouldn't be his behavior I'd be getting an opinion on," Hannibal replied and Franklyn's quizzical look prompted him to continue. "It would be your interpretation of his behavior." The other man nodded in understanding. The two then agreed to keep this between them, for now.

Shortly after Lord Froideveaux had visited Hannibal, he made his own preparations to see Bedelia. The whole mess had been a bit alarming and frustrating. The man was absolutely oblivious and it sounded like his 'friend', Lord Budge, could potentially be a problem. He would be another competitor in the Game that operated similarly to him and two murderers working in the same area never worked out well unless they were together. Hannibal had seen it happen before, been apart of it even.

And he had no interest in working together with Lord Tobias Budge. Not for now at least.

Bedelia had welcomed him into her abode and they enjoyed wine while lounging in front of a fireplace. The beige and dark interior of the space was complemented by the moving firelight and the sun streaking through windows paned with small bits of golden. A space designed to be comforting, better to throw people off their guard.

"I worry that I've made Franklyn feel powerless. He seems obsessed with being my friend when I've tried to show that I'm not interested in what he has to offer. I had to lie to him to keep him appeased, but at this point I'm tempted to simply find a more obvious way to state my intentions," he complained to her.

"You spoke about having opportunities for friends. Am I to assume that he was not it?" Baroness du Maurier asked, face a careful, blank mask.

"You would be assuming correctly. It has begun to interfere with the work both of us must do on a regular basis to manage our estates. I simply don't have time to attend to his 'needs'."

The tiniest downturn of lips betrayed her. “Rejection of friendship can often lead to something a little more complicated. I give what you want where I can afford to, but after my rejecting of yours, you still manage to be here regardless.”

He smirked, “I much more tenacious than Franklyn.”

“And why would that be?”

The two of them rearranged their faces back to maintain their inscrutability. “I feel protective of you,” he explained. “We entered court together and had the same mentor, which practically makes us siblings in the eyes of the Game.” He paused, carefully mulling his words and trying to decide how you would like to speak without giving too much away. “I also feel responsible for the attack on your life that caused you to withdraw. It must have been traumatic.”

She tightened her mouth slightly and a subtle pinch had developed around her eyes. “I am hardly the only mobile to be attacked in their home by a fellow noble or an assassin.”

“My apologies,” Hannibal replied. “Honestly I was worried that bringing up obsessive peers might bring up bad memories. I’m glad to see they haven’t.”

She said nothing.

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Will was surprised to find himself in the Winter Palace the next day; this time the guards largely left him alone. They eyed him warily, but didn’t approach or attempt to otherwise engage. Thank the Creators for the naturally intimidation factor of Seekers of Truth. Jimmy and Brian led the way while Will was flanked by Jack and Beverly. Jack had asked him to leave his staff at home, but the nervousness that was imposing itself on him made him wish to have it in his hands. Something to clutch, if nothing else.

The Seekers and Will were led to the vestibule of the palace where they were informed that the entire court was being kept away. Apparently more than one curious court-goer had tried to sneak in, only to be removed back to the quarters. The sheer state of the body explained both the many that wanted to see the body and the willingness to cooperate they displayed while being led away.

There was a man sitting where people waited to be introduced before entering the ballroom. He was dressed in performance gear from the tailored suit to the strange white gloves that were slightly too large. He faced forward, towards the dance floor, in the place usually reserved for the one that did the announcing. The victim was leaned back in the chair, throat exposed to the world with vocal chords standing out starkly as individual strands. They were taut, tension coming from the head pulled back over the top of the chair. The vocal cords were elongated and supplemented with bits of muscle and thinned intestine, pulled past a carefully created opening in the man’s abdomen, which was hollowed out and kept from collapsing by the rib cage and thin rods running through the flesh. A human lute.

Jack, being the leader, was handled a small sheaf of note-filled parchment, scrawlings visible on both sides. The squad shuffled back and forth for a few moments while he took in the information before finally addressing the group: “The victim is Douglas Wilson, a regular performer here at the Winter Palace. Apparently he was proficient with the flute.”

“Proficient?” asked Beverly.

“Just another way of saying bad,” replied Brian.

Jack ignored them, “He was killed sometime after his last performance. It appears that someone hit him pretty hard in the back of the skull.”

“When was his last performance?” Jimmy asked. He was circling his way around the body as if he was trying to find the best angle to start his sketch.

“About eight days ago,” replied Jack. “Apparently he took over for another performer at the ball.”

“Killer brought him back for another show,” Will remarked. The guards near him startled as he had been quiet up until then and the rest of the squad were eyeing him worriedly.

Jack turned to him, “Do you have any idea who might do this?”

Will shrugged, “Possibly. I’ve just seen the body, but I have some suspicions about what kind of person they are.”

Jack waved away the squad and, in turn, they escorted the guards from the platform. When just the two of them remained, Jack said, “Seems like this is getting easier for you.”

Will kept himself from saying something ruder and left it at: “I suppose. The frequency means that it’s harder than it used to be, but I guess I’m getting comfortable with the current difficulty.”

Jack nodded, “Training.”

“Practice makes perfect,” Will replied. “I wouldn’t call it easier, but I’m acclimating.”

“Happens with all things. So long as you’re trying, I have no complaints. But Will-“ Jack stares at Will and the elf worked to avoid his eyes. “Come to me if you need an ear. Beverly is happy to help too. Jimmy and Brian like you; you’re not alone.” He placed a hand briefly on Will’s shoulder, and then the larger man left. “Come get me when you’re done; I’ll keep the guards from bothering you.”

It took a few moments as Jack exited as well, but eventually Will was left alone. A deep breath in… then out. He took some of his herbs with water and then closed his eyes.

He needed to open the throat from the outside. He absolutely needed to start with that first, his message to the world could not be done sloppily. Three quick incisions. One to bleed him, one to open the trachea, and the last to expose the vocal cords. The spare neck of my

standard instrument is used to open the throat from the inside. They are thinned and elongated. Anything length that they lack will be supplemented later.

Now for the body. A quick incision and some tools he managed to get from Nevarra are all he needs to hollow it out. The ribs will prevent it from collapsing as long as he needs for this part. Reeds are later threaded through the skin to maintain shape. The intestine is given the same treatment as the vocal cords the two are connected for a longer string. There aren't enough vocal cords to equal the amount a lute has, but he will make do with the intestines.

Finally fifteen strings are attached and ready for plucking.

He wanted to play him; he wanted to create a sound. This sound wasn't for the man or from the man; it was from him. His sound.

His announcement.

He gave voice to his death.

Quick claps disturbed him and suddenly-

Will was out of the killer's headspace. The spirit (or was it a demon) helping him along scattered.

Garrett Hobbs sat in the aisles, slow-clapping to his performance of the killer's solo. His decayed body was smiling, cloudy eyes staring straight at him.

Will remained quiet once they got the body back to the barracks. The clinging feeling of eyes on him was still with him as they prepared the body for examination. There had been a spectacle as they took it from the Winter Palace, but those eyes weren't the ones he was worried about. He hadn't seen Garrett Hobbs since he left to deal with Abel Gideon. Seeing him here was… worrying.

It felt a lot like being followed.

"Playing a lute?" he heard Beverly ask.

"Doesn't seem like he was playing," Jack replied, arms crossed as he eyed the room.

Beverly continued, "It seems strange that he would pick a flute player to be a lute. Is this some kind of weird bard thing? I thought they were usually more secretive than that."

"Is using gut normal?" asked Brian. "I mean, I know it's viable, but the only lutes I really saw had silk string."

The presence came back. Not Garrett Hobbs, but the spirit that fled the scene returned. It hovered behind him and

Jimmy levelled Brian a look, “Silk’s expensive.”

“I mean, I know.”

“Most of the lutes I’ve seen were made with gut.”

“It just seems kind of cruel,” replied Brian. Jimmy just shrugged.

“Well he went out of his way to treat the vocal cords and intestines like one would make lute strings. This would’ve taken time,” said Beverly as she carefully looked over the remains. Will threw down another preservation glyph, and he remained feeling weird about this use of his magic.

“It takes about a week to make gut strings,” answered Jimmy. “His last performance was eight days ago. All it would take is for him to get grabbed right after the performance and he would be toast. If the killer made sure to work during that time, it wouldn’t have been too difficult.”

Beverly plucked a single string, “They’ve even been hardened. He was pretty devoted to authenticity.”

“Made them easier to play,” Will replied. The spirit/demon had gotten close enough to him to give him the feeling of truth. The killer saw the people as fuel for his art and this man was terrible as the artist. “Had to open you up to get a decent sound out of you,” he concluded darkly.

Everyone stopped what they were doing. Jimmy and Brian exchanged glances while Jack and Beverly looked at him with concern. He would have admitted that he didn’t know that he was saying the words until after they came out of his mouth and that- that was worrying.

“You pick it up and can’t play it, he’ll put you down and play you,” Beverly joked. The others in the room returned to work, but Jack’s concerned staring remained. Beverly still didn’t seem comforted either.

Jack came up next to him and Will knew what he would ask if Will didn’t say anything. “We should be looking at musicians and people that make instruments, preferably someone that would have been at his last ball. Hopefully they didn’t leave in the night and are still here.”

“Hopefully,” Jack replied.

“This isn’t the first time he’s killed, Jack. There’s a confidence and carefulness to it.”

“Like this?”

“No,” Will said, staring at the body. “Not like this.”

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The team had been at it for a while after the body was brought in. In his embarrassment, Will had pulled back from the rest of the group, sneaking glances at the body laid out every once

in a while. After that comment, Jack had to remind himself of what Beverly told him. Will was an adult and could take care of himself. If something was wrong, Will would come to him. A small part of him questioned that, wondered if Will actually would. The elf seemed like the type that would try and keep all of it tucked away until it burst out on its own, but Beverly's other point crept up on him. If he tried to push it too far, it would be undermining Will's independence. The mage already worried that the Seekers (maybe not their little group, but someone) would grab him and lock him away. If he tried to make Will tell him anything, the other man would just retreat.

Wrestling with his instincts and logic, Jack pushed aside his own notes and moved to leave the area. Opening the door, however, the Senior Seeker found himself face-to-face with none other than his wife.

Bella smiled, disarming all of his dark thoughts and sending them into retreat. They greeted each other with a kiss and she entered the area, basket in hand. "I thought that you all would be busy working, so I decided to bring you all food that wasn't guard rations." She sent him a side-glance and he knew what she really meant. Bella always insisted on meeting any team members he worked with and he hadn't really had the opportunity to introduce her to Will. He couldn't tell whether this was a reprimand or simply her way of getting what she wanted.

She clearly wasn't letting the illness stop her, because the charm was palpable in the room. Will may have been shrinking in his corner, but Bella had even managed to make Brian treat her with the utmost respect and kindness. Jack hadn't even had to try intimidating the man into behaving.

"Beverly! My dear, you look wonderful," Bella greeted his second-in-command in the Orlesian fashion, both of them purposefully exaggerating the movements and length of time for each kiss on the cheek. Jack rolled his eyes at them. Beverly hated Orlesian frippery and nonsense as much as he did, but still tried to acquire knowledge of it herself (unlike Jimmy; Brian hadn't had a choice). Bella had been the one to work with her and both women shared a passion for making fun of the born and bred nobles that stayed in their little Game and did nothing.

As she approached, Brian gave a quick bow and a 'milady', which made her laugh. The two were not particularly close, but Brian liked to think he was the sensible one in the group and Bella actually was sensible. Sometimes he took her advice and sometimes he didn't, but he always immediately wished that he had. Still, she treated him with the same doting attitude she did most of the 'youngest children' (that's what she called them). At this stage, the squad practically were hers, and none of them argued, especially not Brian.

Jimmy, of course, greeted her with a hug almost as soon as she got there. Out of all, Jimmy had been on his team the longest and had been with him through the most. The only reason that he wasn't the second was because Jack knew that he wouldn't want it. He was content with working as a Seeker and what that meant, even on the lowest level. He and Bella had always gotten along wonderfully and, when he decided to pester Jack about his health, Jimmy always made sure to bring up Bella.

Finally, his wife made her way over to their newest member, who was currently looking at Jack imploringly. He would have no mercy. "You I have not met," Bella began.

Will shrunk even further, if that was possible. “My name is Will, your Ladyship,” he replied, the last word dying strangled. He seemed to not know if that was the correct address and the rest of the squad wasn’t going to give him any help. When Bella laughed, the confusion only became worse. “You may call me Bella, my dear. I’m Jack’s wife.”

“Oh,” Will replied and unfurled slightly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She smiled, “The pleasure is all mine.”

“I’ve never met an ambassador before,” Will commented and it only made her brighter.

“So Jack has spoken of me. I was beginning to worry. Yes, I am an ambassador to Empress Celene I. Currently, I’m retiring, but once a servant to her Radiance, always a servant to her Radiance.”

Will wrinkled his nose slightly. “A few ambassadors came to my Clan when I was younger. They didn’t have half the grace you had, milady. If they did, I’m sure Orlais and the Dalish would’ve been allies by now.”

She laughed and lit up. The rest of the squad continued with their work, content that Will and Bella would get along nicely. “You, I like. Far more than the last ‘new member’ that joined.”

Jack saw the group collectively do the math and Brian shouted, “Hey!”

“I’m only joking,” she teased.

Their actual last ‘new member’ never officially joined the group and turned out to be the kind of Seeker that used their position to abuse the mages in the Circle. They weren’t able to get him kicked out of the Seekers, but they did stop associating with him entirely. The group collectively agreed that he never actually joined and that if they ever saw him on the battlefield, some ‘accidental’ friendly fire wasn’t out of the question. As a result, the last member that ‘actually’ joined was Brian.

“I have to leave for now, but I’m sure I’ll see you around more,” Bella farewelled and went off to see the Empress. Her departure prompted the squad to start swarming Will.

It was good his wife liked their newest member, even if he couldn’t join as a Seeker. Jack watched his little family with a smile and contented himself with the knowledge that, while they may not have had children, he and Bella had plenty to care for.

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“This isn’t the first person that I’ve met today. All of these new people are going to overwhelm me.”

Comte Lecter side-eyed Will as he lamented meeting a new person. It wasn’t his fault that apparently people decided that they wanted to talk with him. His Lordship had already told him that he should think of these meetings as opportunities to find connections outside of the Seekers, but Will was perfectly happy with the two little groups he was a part of. Then his Lordship had declared that the groups were only getting bigger, as they were being

introduced as also parts of pre-existing groups, not complete new ones. Will was slightly tired of the fact that the man seemed to always have an answer.

“Who else did you meet today?”

“Bella Crawford.”

“Ah,” sagely replied his Lordship. “A remarkable woman and very close with whom you are about to meet.”

That boded well. Why do all of these people seem to know each other?

“Yes. She came to the barracks today while we were working with a body.”

The Comte stopped. “A body? There has been another murder?”

“Not the Highwayman. Someone else, even though they seem to be trying to emulate their artistry,” Will replied, attempting to soothe the man. “It was the reason that no one was able to go to the ballroom or the vestibule this morning.”

“That was the reason we could not leave.”

Will shrugged, “Probably.”

The noble tilted his head slightly, examining Will. “What did it look like?”

Will had kept the sketch in his notes and showed it to his sponsor. The man examined it as well for a good minute before finally speaking, “Among the first musical instruments played by humans were flutes carved from human bone. It is interesting to seem someone attempt to find another instrument we could be.”

Will helpfully did not mention that the more vicious Dalish Clans had already figured out a few. “This was a performance,” Will mentioned.

“Every life is a piece of music. We are finite events, unique arrangements, sounds thrown together to evoke tone. Sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant,” his sponsor began.

“Sometimes not worth hearing again,” Will concluded. “They staged him on the platform where nobles are announced into the ballroom.”

“Declaring his own arrival onto the stage?”

“Declaring his intentions and his resume. Don’t those things always have the announcer declare their titles and accomplishments. He was trying to let someone know that he was here and that he is an accomplished a killer to his intended audience. Probably even gave told his audience everything they needed to know about his methods,” Will responded. The other man was silent for a time.

“A poet and a psychopath,” said the human after a minute.

“And a craftsman. He treated the vocal cords and intestines like they were catgut; The whole thing was set up like an actual lute.”

“He was attempting to create an actual sound from the process.”

“He was,” came the succinct reply. Will closed his eyes and let the old sound fill him. Garrett Hobbs lurked at his back, breathing in his ear. Each breath exhaled and inhaled with the changing notes. “I can hear it still, behind my closed eyes.”

“What do you see?” his sponsor asked and Will closed them, caught in the moment.

In.

Out.

The breathing fanned out across his ear. Will knew it wasn’t real because his hair didn’t move beyond to stand up on its ends and his Lordship clearly wasn’t saying anything.

In.

Out.

A song ran across his consciousness, fingers flitting between the knots in his hair. Himself, always himself. Always someone else, too.

“Myself.”

“Who was he performing for? It was an announcement.”

He was in a trance, the spirit of the murder was clinging to Hobbs and standing at his back. “A fellow Patron of the arts. A musician. Someone that would appreciate his work for what it was.” It caressed the back of his hair. Was he dreaming? It certainly felt like.

He couldn’t remember falling asleep.

“A serenade.”

“Only for tonight. This isn’t how he kills. He’s never risked getting caught before.”

A small, distant and distracted noise came from around him. “He risked getting caught for a serenade?”

Will breathed in time with those behind him.

In.

And.

Out.

“He wanted someone to see how well he plays.”

Will-

“Will.”

He startled awake to see his Lordship looking at him concerned. “I believe you fell asleep,” Comte Lecter said. “Are you quite alright?”

A glance around showed the room to be slightly darker than before. The light streaming in from the windows was lower in the sky. Did he actually fall asleep? He was still standing! How much of it was a dream?

“My apologies,” Will replied, trying to not show just how nervous this had made him. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“Then my apologies for waking you,” Lecter replied. “But the Empress is here and I wanted to make sure that you are ready to meet her.”

Will took a moment to regain his bearings and straighten himself up. A dull panic was still present in the back of his mind due to what transpired during the last few minutes, but freaking out in front of the Empress of Orlais (arguably the second most powerful woman in Thedas) seems like a very bad idea. Not only was she the Empress, but it would reflect poorly on Comte Lecter, his sponsor.

Nobles, politics, and all of that nonsense. Why couldn’t he have just stayed in the woods. No one would have bothered him with this stuff if he had just learned to mind his own business.

They returned slightly early and the woman that entered behind His Lordship was stunning. She wore a blue and grey gown and her blonde hair was half-down to the middle of her back. Her ‘Radiance’ held a powerful air about her. Will could tell by her bearing why they called the Valmont family “The Reign of the Lions”. This also gave him a bit of greater understanding as to why she and Comte Lecter were so close. They both had a sleek aura of power and grace that suffused their beings. She stalked around the room in a slow circle, making a game of browsing books and art while keeping her eye on him.

Hannibal finally intervened. “Will, this is Empress Celene Valmont I. Your Radiance, may I introduce you to Will.”

Will bowed, even if he didn’t necessarily like the idea of revering a human ruler. The woman was strong though and it would be wrong to disrespect that. The Empress did a slight nod of acknowledgement and respect back. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Will. I have heard so much about you.”

“Your reputation precedes you, your Radiance,” Will replied before rising from his bow.

“I must admit that I am extremely curious about you. A Dalish elf that was hopping from town to town and helping Orlesians. It seems so outside of what your culture allows.”

Will stiffened, “I have not been a part of a Clan for many years, your Radiance.”

“But you reached adulthood among them. You were taught their ways.”

Will conceded, which only made the fascination twinkling in Celene's eyes grow. "I have long had an interest in your culture and magic. If it would be appropriate, I would love to discuss some matters with you later about the workings of elvhen society. My encounters with have been very minimal; my only real experience being with Clan Virnehn."

Will grew even more disquieted as the woman asked for him to talk about his culture. Hannibal knew that it was a sensitive topic for him, but it is difficult to refuse the Empress of Orlais. She had an uncanny charisma when one met her in person. If that didn't sway you, then she was perfectly capable of enacting her retribution in subtle and unique ways. Will was not necessarily aware of this, but, as he said, Celene's reputation preceded her.

As did her penchant for purging Alienages whenever the nobles thought her being too kind or lenient to elves, specifically Halamshiral's. From the look on his face, Hannibal believed that Will may have had an inkling of that one. He was living in the Alienage currently.

"I'd be happy to discuss it with you sometime, your Radiance."

The Empress drew closer to Will, seeming to size him up. It was strange, being under her scrutiny. Hannibal was watching her as well, but making no move to interrupt as she stepped closer. Her Radiance got right in the young man's face and barely bowed forward to whisper in his ear. Hannibal watched as she whispered something which caused Will's eyes to widen and glance towards Hannibal. Then, she departed. Hannibal knew better than to ask what she had said.

The next morning, Franklyn asked to meet up with Hannibal and, for the first time, he gladly agreed. The conversation with Will paired with the conversation he last had with Franklyn had him curious about the Lord Budge with his dark thoughts and suspicious behavior.

Which is exactly how Franklyn led in: "Remember when I said Tobias was saying dark things?"

He nodded, thinking it better to let the man bring about where he was to be by himself.

"One of the things he said was that he was going to cut somebody's throat and play it like an instrument and then they found somebody that had a cut throat that could be played like an instrument!" the man whisper-yelled. Hannibal had made sure that the only servant allowed in this part of the building was Nesiraya, so this conversation would remain truly private. Thankfully. With this expected revelation, he would need time to decide where he wanted to go next.

He tried to sound more skeptical than he was, "Do you believe that Tobias killed the man at the ball?"

The rounder man startled, "I don't- I don't know. If I do, do I have to report it?"

"Is there a reason not to?"

“Yes!” he nearly shouted. Lord Froideveaux seemed to almost jump off his seat. “Everyone already disrespects me! If I don’t say something and I’m wrong, that already puts me lower down. That could potentially be fatal. I’ll also lose a friend.”

“But what if you’re right,” Hannibal prodded back.

Franklyn threw his hands up and settled back, “I’m wrong all of the time. Besides, why would he say something like that to me?”

“Why do you think?”

He scoffed, “Maybe he thought that he would tell the only person no one else would believe.” Then, a thought seemed to dawn on him. “Or he knew I would tell you.” Franklyn looked up at him, concerning shining in his eyes. He didn’t even know the half of it.

The careful plinks of someone working with individual strings on a lute filled the outside air around the suite given to Lord Tobias Budge. Hannibal had given enough thought to what Franklyn said and decided to go and confront Budge in person. The sketches that Will had given him showed a masterful amount of skill handling instruments and the like as well as some natural artistry. The way he conducted the scene, however, was sloppy. To place his kill so publicly while declaring his intentions so that even the Seekers of Truth were able to discern them was bad form. The fact that he required an outside factor in order to properly relay the message was even worse.

While he may dislike Franklyn, Hannibal bore the man no true ill will. It seemed that Lord Budge, with that statement, had deemed Franklyn deserving of death. The man was an incompetent noble and nothing more. He bumbled his way in and out of politics, even his occasional rudeness was accidental. The only way to tell where his next step should be would be to confront the man and understand his intentions. Only then would he be able to act.

Nodding to the guards, Hannibal waited while they went inside to ask if he would be permitted in. A song that he didn’t recognize had filtered through, echoing off the halls with a melancholy mystery. The man’s competence as a killer may be in question, but there was no doubting his ability with music.

The piece finished and shortly afterwards the guards came back out and offered him entry. It was very gracious of Lord Budge to allow him entry on such temporary notice, so Hannibal made sure to bring a good wine as tribute to the other noble. It was something from Rialto. Tobias Budge greeted him gently, almost delicately, when he entered. “I remember you from the ball. Franklyn introduces us.”

Hannibal nodded. “Yes; I’m his neighbor. Lord… Budge is it?”

“Yes,” the other man succinctly replied. Lord Budge was blatantly staring at Hannibal, eyes wide and tracking every movement. It wasn’t suspicious or wary; his gaze held the fascination of a person not wanting to miss a single moment.

“Franklyn told me that you are a bit of a music enthusiast.”

Lord Budge nodded, “I make all of my own instruments and everything.”

“I’ve heard that metal string has grown in fashion. Some have been learning to craft steel for instruments instead of the traditional gut.”

The other man made a disgusted noise. “I understand that crafting string out a steel shows a significant strength in the worker’s metallurgy, but it doesn’t sound quite the same.”

Hannibal quirked up a lip, “I prefer it as well. The strings have a richer sound. Your instruments certainly sounds better than most.”

Budge smiled, eyes staying dark. “I apologize for taking so long to answer you. I didn’t know that you were coming or I’d have made ready for you right away.”

“I didn’t want to stop you from playing. Was that an original composition?”

There was a strong hint of pride in the other man’s voice when he answered, “Something small I’ve been writing. Do you compose?”

“I discover,” Hannibal corrected slightly, enjoying the look of recognition and delight on the other man’s face. He looked pleased. Lord Budge was just as needy as Franklyn after all; he simply hadn’t found a person to fixate on yet. Hannibal took Budge’s temporary silence as permission to continue, “You cannot impose traditional composition on an instrument that allows for so much more.”

“What do you play on?”

“The harp actually.”

Another smile. “They usually require a delicate touch, but can do much more than traditional players allow.”

“We keep ourselves to conventional notes and styles. Pushing boundaries and allowing for experimentation if we allow the use of the whole instrument,” Hannibal pressed.

“All instruments can do that if we wish.”

“Do you only play the lute?”

“Unfortunately, but I find that many forget the lute’s flexibility as well. It doesn’t always sound like the ones that play in taverns and inns.”

Hannibal straightened his back, “It seems we both play between conventional notes. Pity that much of the musical talent in Halamshiral like to stay within them. I hear that one of her Radiance’s flutists requires replacing.”

“Such a tragedy. Altogether horrible,” Lord Budge replied, no inflection to his voice. Sloppy if he were to do that in front of anyone else. Hannibal had no way of knowing if the show

was only for him. Better if he play along; he needed to get the lord alone.

“Not altogether. An unfortunate way to leave, but the Empress’s court musicians are better off without.”

The other noble nodded, smile plastered on his face. “It really is. Now, but what brings you here?”

“My aforementioned harp. As one musician to another, I would greatly appreciate it being restrung. You wouldn’t happen to know anyone, would you?”

Lord Budge took the bait with a radiant smile on his face, “I would gladly check it over for you.”

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Will was busy at a tome of spells that he had been working through. He felt like he had been staring at it for so long that the words were blurring together. It was important for him to better his knowledge of Spirit and Creation magic. The former due to his job and the fact that it was his specialty prior to the incident with Abigail and the latter because the incident with Abigail had left him with a need to save people. This was a small way that he could do that.

Creation was known as the hardest school for a reason and he needed to understand it beyond the theoretical. He had learned the preservation glyph out of necessity and simple healing had taken a lot of practice, but if he wanted to learn more, he needed to feel it.

Shutting the tome, Will resolved to go to bed early and attempt to sleep. He’d keep researching a little in the morning. A glance outside revealed that it was still daylight out and he almost banged his head against the table for his lack of concentration today. Then he heard it: a scuffling inside the hearth, specifically above the smoke canopy. Will quickly doused the fire and approached his fireplace.

Very carefully, he practically stood on the coals as he tilted his head near where the chimney would be and put his ear up to it. The scuffling continued and became a clear whine. Scrambling away, Will went off to find a hammer or something to help the animal get out.

“Um, Will,” came a voice from outside a little time later. He had just managed to create a good-sized hole in the wall was currently peering through to see where the animal might’ve gone. “We’re all a little bit concerned. A couple of neighbors could hear the noise from outside and wanted someone to come check on you.” It was Beverly.

Will wasn’t sure if he should feel insulted or grateful that they didn’t come check themselves. “Come on in,” he said to Beverly and jumped off the chair he had been using to push himself inside.

She came in and, upon seeing him, took a double-take. A quick glance at his hands and arms showed that he was probably covered in soot. “Sorry, there was an animal in my fireplace. I was trying to get it out.”

The half-elf approached with less caution. “What kind of animal was it?” He shrugged. When she gave him a curious look, he said, “Whatever it was, it was gone by the time I opened it up. It might’ve crawled out the top or it could have somehow gotten into the walls or something.”

A small, sad look fell on Beverly’s face and she gently moved in towards him. She knew better than to ask if he was okay and that bothered him. His struggles were supposed to be his own, quiet. Then, he was engulfed as his friend wrapped her arms around him.

The hug was… surprisingly not terrible. It was warm and comforting. He could use some comfort. His head was always a messy place and he had thought it was too messy for romance, but…

But.

He liked Beverly. He thought that Beverly liked him. She was kind and cool; they had plenty of interesting conversations. Maybe it wasn’t that he was too messy for romance; maybe he just needed someone else to help clean up the space.

His friend started to pull away and he could see some of the concern shining in her eyes. He didn’t need her concern right now, only her care.

“Will,” Beverly said. So he kissed her.

It was warm. Wet. He had kissed before, but it was always with small childhood crushes. This was more passionate and they got caught up in it. Eventually, they broke away, Beverly looking slightly frustrated and a little ashamed.

“What’s wrong?” Will asked. He thought the kiss was a good one, even with the few kisses that he had in his life.

“Will, why did you kiss me?”

“Do I need a set reason to kiss you? You’re beautiful, we get along, what else is there?”

She gently cupped his shoulder and stepped away. “Will, you are my best friend. I’m not saying you aren’t incredibly handsome or that the kiss was bad. I just don’t think of you that way.”

He breathed sharply through the nose and tried not to be offended, even as his insides recognized the truth of her words. Maybe it was because they had been so close and the fact that she was in a position to understand him better than other people. She knew what kind of stuff he dealt with and accepted him. Some of the stuff she had even dealt with herself. Things were easy around her, simple. With the craziness that was going on in his head and the world around him, he wanted refuge there. But she was his friend and he didn’t want to ruin that because of a lapse in judgement. A thought strayed back to the conversation with Alana, something that seemed so long ago. This wasn’t what he was looking for. Beverly wasn’t romantically interested in him either, which meant that he needed to back off anyway.

“I’m sorry,” Will told her. “That was inappropriate and wrong of me.”

She grinned. “It was a nice kiss and I’ll be sure to remember it later, but not interested. I’m good with being buds though.”

“Remember it later?” he laughed. It was really a happy one.

She protested, “It was a good kiss.”

“I’m up for being ‘buds’.”

“You do know I’m never going to let you live this down.”

He chuffed and finally smiled, “You wouldn’t be yourself if you did.”

Beverly nodded and left him in the room, alone with his dogs. The clock candle sent out a few sparks and one of the Mabari rubbed against his leg. The elf looked over at the canopy, watching the rubble as if it could move at any moment.

About a minute later, the panic set in.

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His private dining room had been meticulously set for the occasion. It was not everyday when one invited a fellow hobbyist into their home and allowed themselves to be observed in their most natural setting. This was doubly true when your shared hobby was murder. A small thrill went through him at the thought of what the Seekers would do if they ever figured out that two killers had become acquainted.

Of course, Hannibal would not be working with or cooperating with Lord Tobias Budge. This meeting was a chance for him to understand his peer and work out his motives, potentially decide how to end this relationship. Hannibal prevented himself from imagining the man’s death and how he would accomplish it, and continued to set the food around the table.

It wouldn’t do to get ahead of himself.

“Aqua Magus. A dance with death in a drink,” Hannibal declared as he placed a glass of the spirit in front of his guest.

The man carefully sipped the drink, aware of the warning to not drink Aqua Magus in quantity, less the person want a slow and painful death via lyrium poisoning. “I’ve never had a drink infused with lyrium before. I suppose someone grew curious for an actual taste of magic.”

“I almost had the pleasure of drinking Legacy White Shear. Sadly, I mentioned that I was not a whiskey person and lost the opportunity,” shared Hannibal and the two men continued their slow, small sips. Hannibal set down his glass. “I’m afraid I must be upfront with you, and my apologies for being so blunt. Did you kill the flutist.”

To his credit, Lord Budge did not even pause. “Do you really have to ask?”

“No,” he acquiesced. “I simply thought it was a good time to change the subject. We are, after all, here for a reason.”

“Is this suite private?”

“My bard is busy insuring it is.”

Lord Budge’s eyes narrowed. “How can I know that this ‘bard’ can be trusted?”

Hannibal allowed the corners of his lips to twitch. “I assure you, she is quite capable. She is also aware of my actions and my hobby. Neither of us will be betrayed.”

Both of the men were quiet for a moment, almost as if Tobias was trying to figure out if Hannibal was lying or not. Eventually, “So Franklyn gave you my message.”

“The brutality was extremely obvious; they’ve brought in the Seekers to investigate.”

“Let them come,” said Lord Budge, all bravado and no caution. He took careful bite and made an appreciative noise. Both of them ate for a moment, before Hannibal decided to proceed with his ‘interrogation’.

“You wish to be caught?”

“They can certainly try. I want them to,” the other noble said and took what was probably too large of a gulp of the Aqua Magus. Hannibal could tell because the man did a full-body flinch as it burned down his throat. When Lord Budge continued, his voice was dark and raspy. “They man learn of my hobbies or my open dislike of the flutist, but they’ll never truly see. They’ll send people to question me and I’ll kill them. Then, I will find Franklyn and kill him. After that, it won’t be difficult to disappear back to Rivain or Antiva; there I will have all of the protection I need.”

Such a waste. “Don’t kill Franklyn.”

Lord Budge smirked… or was it a grin? His teeth were bared with mirth and wrath. “I’ve been looking forward to it.” He lowered his head in faux-embarrassment. There was no true humility or deference in the act. “I was going to kill you, too.”

He didn’t need to state the obvious. “Of course you were.”

“I make my own string and I must get it from somewhere,” Budge boasted. “If anyone asks, I import them from Antiva.”

Strange then, that the man seemed excited about killing him and Franklyn, but seems to have decided to refrain on the former. “What changed your mind about killing me? Or have you changed your mind?”

Budge leaned forward, stopping just short of intruding on Hannibal’s space. “It changed after I followed you out of your suite one night. Out of the palace and into the square where no one bothered to watch you.”

So that is what it was. On a roll, the other noble continued, voice breathy with satisfaction. “Have you ever wanted to get caught? To see what would happen?”

Perhaps, but not now and not anytime soon. “You’re reckless.”

The man moved out of the space slightly, but the lack of distance between them was still unwanted. “I’m not going to tell anyone what I saw you do and do well,” Tobias purred. “My recklessness doesn’t concern you.”

“It won’t just be yourself that you’re drawing attention to… or have you forgotten that the gift appeared to be a serenade?”

“I want a friend,” was the reply. “I could use a friend. I would love someone that could understand me. People like us are rare. It’s so hard to find someone that thinks like I do and can see the world and the people in it the same way.”

It was almost pathetic really. “I know exactly how you feel, but I don’t want to be your friend.”

“Then why invite me to dinner?” asked Budge, gesturing to the food between them. “I checked your harp and it was fine. Clearly there was another reason!”

Hannibal allowed himself the smallest of smiles. “I was going to kill you.” Tobias glanced down at his almost finished plate. “I didn’t poison you, Tobias. I wouldn’t do that to the food.”

They both sat on the edge of their seats, the imbalance of them now being in Hannibal’s territory clearly weighing down on Tobias. Part of the predator’s body was coiling, muscles preparing for his prey to attempt to leave or strike before their fight truly began. It was then that several sharp raps banged on the door of his suite.

“Were you expecting someone?” asked Tobias, the other killer not daring to look away from Hannibal.

“No,” came Hannibal’s honest and monotone reply. The two remained staring at each other, before Hannibal backed out of the room and Tobias edged towards the window. Lord Budge took a quick turn and opened it to leave, but with a person waiting to be let in (and banging on the door with increasing freneticism), he had better things to do.

The door opening removed any potential thoughts of murdering the late night guest. Will was on the other side. This time he came without being summoned first!

“I kissed Beverly!” the elf said, scrambling inside.

“Come in,” Hannibal replied. A quick glance into the all showed that only a few guards had come over to see the cause of the ruckus. Will had gotten inside the palace… without being noticed. On his own.

Remarkable boy.

Hannibal sent the guards off and turned to the pacing guest wearing a hole in his floors. Will glanced up as he entered and then sudden stopped to take in the room. A wine stain blush of embarrassment was on his face as he noticed his surroundings. “You had a guest?”

“A peer. You just missed him.”

Will gave him a quizzical look. “He didn’t finish his dinner?”

“Important business drew him away. You know how us nobles are.” Thankfully, bringing up the ‘plight’ of nobility immediately disinterested Will in whatever was bothering Lord Budge. “Now you are receiving the benefits of his untimely departure.”

Will raised an eyebrow.

“I have dessert for two.”

This didn’t seem to make the younger man feel any better, so Hannibal gestured for him to enter the suite’s kitchen. Celene did her best work with this particular feature of his suite and he would always appreciate the time she took to catering his whims. He was one of the very few nobles that supported her whole-heartedly; most wished more for war and neglected to appreciate the arts or the merits of peace. Orlais was the most culturally-rich nation in Thedas and they wanted to waste their resources on battle. Pathetic.

His appreciation for the arts certainly extended to the young man in front of him. Will was flushed and frenetic, tamping hard down on the rampant energy that cause him to pace earlier. It was bursting at his seams.

“What was Beverly’s reaction?”

Will stopped and wrapped his arms around himself. “We both agreed that we were better as friends.”

Good. “There is a power difference between the two of you. You are, technically, in her charge. If you were to do something wrong, she could arrest you.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “I don’t believe I’m going to do anything any time soon. Besides, she was right. We have a lot in common, but I don’t think we would work as a couple. We wouldn’t be good for each other.”

“Suspicion on both sides, even if not necessarily for each other. There is also the difference in upbringings and lifestyles, which could lead to problems. You might grow to resent one another.”

A sigh and then the body slumped. “I know.”

“Then I am curious why you kissed her and then felt the need to come tell me about it,” Hannibal declared and began plating up the dessert.

Will shrugged and dropped his arms to his sides, “I panicked. I had just kissed my best friend and we had the second most awkward conversation I’ve ever had in my life. I don’t even

know what came over me."

Hannibal actually visibly raised his eyebrow at Will for this. "Clearly there was another reason that you did it."

That caused the rest of Will's posture to deflate. "Something happened. It's why she had to come over in the first place." So it happened at Will's home? This is why Hannibal should put more pressure on him to move in, to prevent strange happenings such as this. "I- I thought there was an animal in my hearth, so I broke it down. The neighbors heard and everyone get on. I told her what happened and when she looked at me, maybe her face changed I don't know. She knew."

"What did she know?"

Will's body contracted and Hannibal could almost taste the bile in the other man's throat. Upset filled the air with its beautiful stench. "There wasn't anything there. It was all in my head," whispered Will, voice hoarse. It almost sounded like he had been screaming. Maybe he had been, inside where it would remain silent.

Hannibal needed to keep him a little more grounded, for now. "Did she say that?"

"She didn't have to." Will's breathing picked up. "I didn't want to admit it, but I'm worried. I've been sleep-walking. There are these awful headaches and now I'm hearing things. I've dealt with it all my life, but never to this degree… Am I being haunted by a demon or am I just finally going crazy?"

"You wanted something stable to ground onto, while your moorings are sand. A clutch for balance."

"Because I'm losing mine."

Hannibal placed the dessert in front of Will and the other man reluctantly began eating. "We've talked before about the increased frequency of your willing trips to the Fade and that they've had some adverse side effects on your daily life. This could be just some more of them."

Will scoffed, "I can't exactly go up to Jack and say, 'Jack I'm sorry, but I can't do this anymore; I'm having trouble sleeping at night and am dreaming during the day.' That's kind of what I do. I'm too good at it to stop now."

"Is there something different about this one? Something that might have triggered the sound. Can you still hear his echoing around your skull?"

Will nodded, "It's practically our song."

"Maybe," Hannibal paused and pretended to be hesitant. "I don't like speaking ill of other nobles, especially when I don't have direct proof. A friend of mine amongst the politicians spoke to me and mentioned that he suspects an acquaintance of his to be involved in the murder." Will perked up slightly and Hannibal rushed to qualify, "Neither of us have proof to

bring to the Seekers, but if this small suspicion can help ease your suffering, then I will help how I can." He needed Will to not suspect him of involvement. Will nodded for him to continue. "He is a music enthusiast that lives here, in the Winter Palace, during season. The man repeatedly mentioned his hatred for the flutist and even made some comments that placed him firmly in our suspicion."

"I'll look into it. What's his name?"

"Lord Tobias Budge; he's a marquis." Hannibal watched as Will visibly kept a note about Tobias Budge to ask about later.

"Thank you. I'll make sure that this gets followed up on."

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"Will!" he heard as he was exiting Hannibal's study. Will turned to see Abigail coming towards him. Like the last time that he saw her, she was dressed rather elegantly but still managed to be practical. Her skirt didn't drag on the floor and the sleeves of her dress were loose enough to allow movement and hide a dagger, but not the strange flowy things he had seen on some nobles. She pressed forward through the tension between him and settled there. "Will," she repeated with a smile. The girl he had rescued five and a half months ago looked like she had grown so much, almost a woman now.

"Hello Abigail," he replied when he realized that he had yet to. The small frown that had been growing on her face softened. "How are you?" he awkwardly continued when the words hadn't come.

Apparently they sounded as half-assed as he felt they were, if the look on Abigail's face was anything to go by. She couldn't seem to decide if she should be amused or irritated and wavered between both. "Could be better, what with moving to a new place and all that came before. Would be better if all of the people in my life wanted to be a part of it." Will winced. "And how are you?"

"Um, good." She nodded. For a couple of seconds, the two of them just floundered, neither sure if they should leave or talk or what else they should do. "Look. I want to talk with you," the young woman said finally, pre-empting his words that would facilitate his excuse to leave. "I've noticed that you've been avoiding me lately. Before we left Red Crossing, you and I had been fairly close. After we came back here, suddenly you weren't coming to see me."

"Abigail," Will breathed out. "You have a life here. Things are happening to you and for you. Good things. I don't want to ruin that for you with my presence."

"Your presence," she spat out. "Your presence is a source of comfort for me. I used to resent you for trying to be my dad after you killed him, but you were working so hard to be in my life despite that. Eventually, you became a piece of my family. Maybe I don't think of you as a dad, but I do care about you."

Will glanced around and brought the two of them over to another area to sit quietly. It was still the dead of night, after all, and if this continued the way it was, she would be shouting down the palace. He owed her the truth, some of it at least. “Abigail, I care about you too. I’d even say that I love you, to a certain degree.”

He didn’t like the uncomfortable look on her face, but he kept going. “I’m avoiding you - yes I’ll admit it - because I have a lot going on in my life right now. I’m worried about some stuff and I’m in a place where I don’t feel like it’s safe for you to be around me.”

“Don’t feel like it’s safe for me to be around you?” she asked dubiously. It was pretty clear that the words weren’t to her liking.

He sighed. “Mages have it a little different than most people. I’m worried that some problems I’m dealing with might affect you, too.”

She scoffed. “Everyone has problems. I have plenty of problems. I don’t want someone I care about refusing to be in my life to be one of them.”

Her words stirred the immense amount of guilt he felt over what happened with her father, but he tamped it down. If his only motivation for being around her was guilt, Abigail would sense it like a foul odor. It wouldn’t be right for him to hold her so tightly for something as simple as guilt.

He did care about her though. He felt responsible for her; perhaps once that was motivated by guilt, but there was a strong part of him that wanted to see her grow. Will had been a large part of her life for four months; those four months weren’t so far removed for either of them to forget. To leave her now would be to decimate whatever relationship they had. Her safety or her comfort?

He hesitantly delivered his response, “If you’re truly comfortable with everything going on, I could remedy some of my absence. I still want you safe and believe you are better without me right now, but I want you to be happy and to be a part of that happiness more. I’m not saying I’ll be there tomorrow or the day after, but I think with a few conversations with you, me, Alana, and Hannibal, we can figure something out.”

The look of joy on her face was worth abandoning his reservations. They still had a chance.

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“I have found myself in a place where I see a chance for friendship.”

Hannibal was visiting Bedelia after the encounters of the past few days. With everything that had happened the night before, he thought it prudent to visit his peer and sometimes-ally. It was in the morning, so she wasn’t entirely ready for him to be there. He took more than a little pleasure in catching her off-guard, but after allowing her some time to ready herself, she transformed into a gracious host.

“Is there someone new in your life?” she asked, face as impeccable as her clothes. Both were done in a fashion to be a mask, even without an actual one on.

He nodded carefully and kept his face decidedly neutral. “I met someone much like myself. A man that shares my hobbies and even my worldviews. Despite his attempts to pursue friendship with me, I am not interested in his.”

She raised an eyebrow at him quizzically, so he continued. “It seems that the subject has been thrown around a lot lately and this latest offer made me curious about friendship.”

“Very interesting. People like us don’t usually have friends, but I’ve always thought you a bit more solitary than most.”

It almost made him smile. “A polite way of saying unsociable?”

“We both know that’s not necessarily true. You tend to hold yourself apart, however, and make it very difficult for people to categorize you. I think you like it that way,” she replied. From her spot perched in her chair, Bedelia carefully rearranged her legs. She always became fidgety when she was wondering if she chose the right words.

“Categories are so banal,” he replied. “Besides, I am positive that once you figure me out, you’ll lose interest.” The corners of his lips twitched up in an approximation of a smile.

The noble lady furrowed her brows at him. “Whose friendship are you considering?”

“Oddly enough, my beneficiary. I would prefer if I could call him my protégé, much as you and I were proteges of Lady Mantillon. Unfortunately, we do not share that relationship. We’ve discussed him before.”

“Ah. Will Graham,” was said with such disinterest he wondered if they were talking about the same person. Will was beyond fascinating and did not deserve such a tone. Hannibal decided that the only way to truly convey how he felt about the situation would be to explain it. “He is nothing like me. The ways that we see and understand the world are entirely different, yet he can assume my point of view.”

“In what ways has he demonstrated this capability?” she breezed.

“He hasn’t done so directly, but I certainly see the capacity in him.”

The baroness gave him a curious look, trying to understand the words and how they related to one another. “I thought that he read the Fade the commune with spirits and that they helped him understand murderers.”

“I’ll admit that it is not a direct correlation,” Hannibal conceded. “The spirits, however, are largely considered unknowable and alien. If someone can commune with them and derive meaning and then understand the feelings and thoughts of the murderers behind them, does that demonstrate the capacity?”

“So his empathizing with murderers counts as demonstrating capacity for understanding you?”

“As good as one as any. I find it reassuring.”

She sighed and fell slightly into the seat. Her hair managed to stay completely still and in place, despite the tiredness he could see through the cracks in her veneer. “We all wish to have someone that understands us, Hannibal. Someone that can see us or has the ability to see us. That kind of intimacy requires trust.” Bedelia looked him right in the eyes, challenging him to deny her claims. “Trust doesn’t come easily for you.”

“You’ve helped me to better understand what I want in a friendship,” Hannibal told her, allowing the implication of her lack of friendship to hang between them; a corpse dangling. “And what I don’t.”

She swallowed. It was her only reaction, which would have gone unnoticed by anyone not studying her so heavily. “Someone worthy of your friendship.”

“Yes,” was all he said. Declared, really. There were no better words for it.

“You spend a lot of time building walls, Hannibal. It’s natural to want to see if anyone is clever enough to climb over them.”

He needed to find someone worthy of his friendship. Had he found them already?

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Will’s arrival at the suite of Lord Tobias Budge had him joined by two of the Empress’s guards. At first they had been suspicious of his behavior around the esteemed noble’s quarters, but once Will flashed the seal that Empress Celene had given him (and they noticed the Seeker Jack had sent with him), they immediately stopped their interrogation to help with is task. Will had never known humans to be so willing to help him in his life. Maybe he should make noble friends more often.

He really shouldn’t.

The noble opened the door to the suite and inclined his head curiously at the crew in front of his door. To be fair, they consisted of one of the Empress’s guards, a Seeker that looked fresh out of the Bastion, and a half-feral looking elf-mage (according to Beverly). If the man did a double take, there really was no reason not to expect it. What probably made it more strange was that the feral elf was the one heading the group.

“Hello, Lord Budge. My name is Will; I’m with the Seekers of Truth. May I ask you a few questions?”

The man raised an eyebrow and opened the door wider and stepped aside, allowing them in. “What can I help you with?”

Will flashed the seal again and made sure that the patched Seeker symbol in his armor was prominent. Jack had been trying to teach him the art of posturing. It hadn’t been working so far, but the man in front of him hadn’t called him knife ear or deferred to one of his human companions yet. Maybe there was something to Jack’s teachings. “We’re investigating the death of Douglas Wilson. He was-”

“One of the Empress’s performers. A flutist, I believe?”

Huh. “Did you know him?”

“I was aware of him.” Not really an answer, but okay. “All of us nobles have a responsibility to know each other and anyone that comes in our circles, whether they are bards or performers.”

“That’s why we’re here, Lord Budge. I’ve been told that you were quite the music enthusiast and that perhaps you had some information which would help us.”

The man stiffened. “I heard someone tried to use his intestines to make a lute.”

Will turned to him, staring carefully at the man’s chin. “Why do you say tried?”

The noble scoffed slightly and the people flanking Will shifted uncomfortably. “You can’t just take viscera and play it. Instrument strings have an entire process that they have to go through. It isn’t a simple pull and play.”

“The man was missing for over a week and apparently he was treated in such a manner.”

Lord Budge tilted his head. “Are you asking about someone that might know how to make strings?”

Will had an idea of who might be able to make them. “Anyone come to mind?”

“I have mine imported from Antiva,” Budge said, smile plastered onto his face and fake, so **fake.** He heard the sound of something scratching down the hall and a whimper. Something was scraping and smacking the walls; it sounded unmistakably like an animal.

“Something wrong?” asked the Lord. The other two men in the room shifted uncomfortably. Will knew better than to ask if they had heard something. If they did, they were ignoring it. If they didn’t, they might accuse him of being maleficarum.

“I need to go check something. I’ll be right back,” Will assured and then made his way quickly out of the room. The elf followed the noise; it was only down a few halls. When he looked up, the halla was there.

It’s feathers shot out behind it and its breath played upon his face. It was hot and sticky, a warm stench accompanying the damp.

Then it was gone. There was nothing there.

His heart pounding, Will made his way back to Budge’s suite. “Sorry about that. I-”

It was empty.

He… He didn’t make the whole encounter up, did he?

That actually happened!

Will rushed in the room, and in his blind panic he tripped over something solid. Something fleshy.

The still body of one of the Empress's guards stared back at him. Its face was a mottled mess of bruises and cuts, the throat was gashed open. Looks like Comte Lecter was right. Will wasn't equipped to fight the man, but he didn't get the chance to not. When he turned around, the first thing he saw was the dangling viscera of the Seeker's body, armor meaning nothing to the man that could easily find its chinks.

Tobias Budge loomed over him and began choking him with a thin wire. Will struggled, managing to just barely put his hand between the wire and his throat, the sheer force and structure of the wire sliced deep him his palm and fingers while black dots danced across his vision. His throat wasn't being cut, but the pressure was still present on his windpipe. Will kicked out against Budge's weight, barely aware that he was on the floor instead of standing up.

Candles flickered around them and made the shadows in the room merge with the dots in his vision. Budge was so hard to see. If Will didn't do something soon, he wouldn't last long.

He closed his eyes and ignored the world around him. The lack of air made it difficult to do, but Will pulled up what little remained of his concentration and pushed it outward, manifesting his last dregs of energy as Will incarnate.

Budge was blasted backwards and Will took in his first good breath. It stung badly, but he used the mottled meat of his hand to pry the wires of his neck. Deep breaths.

When he finally managed to be aware of his surroundings again, Tobias Budge was gone.

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Franklyn was weeping in front of him. Hannibal had finally decided to tell him that he simply wasn't interested in Lord Froideveaux's friendship, but would be happy to remain allies. It had become slightly too much to continue trying to appease the man, and as his increasing incompetence in the Game became apparent, Hannibal believed that he was in a place where Franklyn wouldn't challenge him. The more that Hannibal spent time with the younger noble, he became aware that it was very likely that Franklyn wouldn't attack him anyway.

"Why does this always happen to me?" the man sobbed out. Hannibal gingerly extended a handkerchief, which was immediately soiled.

"I'm sorry, Franklyn. I simply didn't feel comfortable trying to keep it from you any longer. We've had so many discussions about friendship and you have been very honest with me about your intentions and what you're going through."

"Every time I try to extend my hand to another noble, they reject me. You've certainly been the nicest about it, but it still hurts."

"Perhaps you focus so much on connecting to other nobles that it becomes a little overwhelming. We are naturally inclined to distrust one another. Honestly, I think Orlais

might not be the best place for you," Hannibal advised.

"What?" Franklyn was aghast. "Orlais is my home! I've lived here since birth!" Unlike some, he did not say. Although, it was Franklyn. It is possible that he simply did not think to say it.

"I am aware, Franklyn, but your style and need for friends might be better suited to Ferelden." Admittedly for someone else that statement was a slight dig, but for Franklyn, Hannibal actually meant it. If Franklyn wasn't careful, someone would probably try and get rid of him soon for his land. Hannibal could handle himself, but Franklyn seems… delicate.

That is, of course, if Tobias didn't try and kill him first.

"You're only saying this because you don't respect me!" Franklyn reared up his head. It was true that Hannibal didn't respect him, but that wasn't why he was saying this. Franklyn was a liability. "It's because I wouldn't report Tobias, wasn' it?"

"Report Tobias for what?" came a voice near the front of his suite. A blood-drenched Tobias walked in the room, several gashes oozing seriously. There was too much blood for it to be all his.

"Tobias?" Franklyn asked and the two stood. "Oh Maker! Is that your blood?"

Tobias entered the room and gradually stalked his way towards Franklyn. His footsteps were sure and Hannibal tried to keep equidistant between them. Budge's pace was slow, one step at a time with plenty of room for his prey to bolt. "I came to say goodbye," Tobias answered.

"What do you mean goodbye?"

"I've just killed two men; It won't be long before there is a hunt for me." Tobias clenched his fist and stared at the two of them, accusingly. "The Seekers of Truths' pet mage came to question me about the murder." Everything slowed down. So much potential lost in a single sentence, in a single choice. He wanted to lay all of the blame down at Tobias' feet (and he did lay plenty), but he was the one that sent Will to him. What was initially supposed to be a test of Will's worthiness became his death. Such a shame about the young man, but Hannibal hadn't anticipated the profound effect it would have on him. Apparently, he had fooled himself into thinking that the world would manage to carry on without the elf there with him.

Vaguely, Hannibal could recognize Franklyn attempting to talk Tobias down, which he knew would not turn out well. He told the man to leave, which caused Tobias to glare at him, but so what. He took something from Hannibal and now he would be receiving the same treatment.

Franklyn listened to Tobias and remained where he was, still trying to talk the other man down from his vendetta and urges. That was when Tobias said, "I'm not alone," and gave Hannibal a meaningful look. Now that he had said it, Franklyn could no longer live he knew too much.

"That's right! You're not alone. Nothing has happened in our friendship that you and I can't recover from-"

Hannibal reached forward and snapped Franklyn's neck. It was quick and probably painless. Much less painful than anything that Tobias had planned for him. The man in question glared up at Hannibal. "I was looking forward to that."

There was no expression on his face. "I know."

They both lunged.

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The place was a wreck when Will finally got there. The furniture was strewn about and the garden built into the walls was smashed. All of the plants would have to be transplanted, if they even lived. After his incident with Budge, Will immediately had gone to Jack and gotten a group together to locate where the missing Marquis had gone. Apparently his 'friend' was a noble named Lord Franklyn Froideveaux, a Baron in the Dales. When Jack explained what Hannibal had told him, the search party immediately began searching for that gentleman as well.

Of course it led back to Comte Lecter's suite.

The man himself was sitting on a lounge having a healer look over him. He was practically despondent, whole body slumped in a way that Will had never seen the normally unflappable man. His clothes were torn and bloodied; Will idly thought that he probably had an outfit for every day of the year, so he would be fine.

Once he started to approach, the noble's head turned to see him and then his body joined in greeting. There was so much on the man's face and it was still difficult to determine what, exactly, it all meant. Will sat in front of him and shooed away the healer that was currently working on him. It took a moment, but Will was able to start his simple healing spell and close up some of Hannibal's wounds. It was a good thing that the man's pain was largely superficial in nature and none of them were serious injuries. Those things could be deadly or detrimental if given enough time to fester.

"Lord Budge told me that he was interrogated by the Seekers of Truth, led by a mage, and that he had murdered two men." There was an audible break in the lord's breath, almost like he had liquid bubbling up in his throat. Will knew that there was nothing wrong of that nature, so it was a curious noise. "I thought you were dead."

That was… fair. If Will hadn't been lucky enough to cast Mind Blast, he would've been. "You had reason to worry."

Jack storms in, followed closely by the rest of the crew. All three of them greeted him politely when they entered; Beverly looked over at Lecter and waggled her eyebrows. He, in return, politely refrained from sticking out his tongue.

"Tobias Budge kills a guard for the Empress and a Seeker of Truth, nearly kills your beneficiary, and then comes straight for you," Jack stated.

Hannibal… Hannibal replied, "He came to kill an acquaintance of mine, Baron Froideveaux."

Will interrupted whatever anyone was going to say next. “I’m assuming Lord Froideveaux was the friend you were telling me about.” Hannibal nodded, so Will turned to Jack. “Baron Froideveaux told Comte Lecter that he suspected a friend was involved with the murder of the flutist. His Lordship told me, so I investigated. I’m the one that got him involved.”

Jack turns his gaze back to Hannibal. “Was the Baron whom Budge was serenading?”

“I do not know,” Hannibal replied, wincing slightly as he moved. “I believe Franklyn knew more than he was telling me. He told Lord Budge that he didn’t have to kill anymore, then Budge broke Franklyn’s neck and attacked me.”

A small disturbance happened to their left and they looked to find several guards placing the body of Baron Franklyn Froideveaux on a stretcher and taking it elsewhere. His eyes were bulged out and the awkward angle of his head lolling was unpleasant. It wouldn’t matter for much longer, he was going to be burned. A little ways away, Marquis Tobias Budge was being treated with far less decorum. There was no stretcher, he was simply being carried like a sack of potatoes.

“So you killed, Lord Budge?” Jack asked. He looked so tired.

“Yes.”

“Could Lord Froideveaux been involved in any of it?”

Hannibal shrugged loosely. It was strange, Will had never seen the man so expressive before and it was still miniscule movement. “I thought this was a simple matter of poor choice in friends.”

Jack made a disgusted noise. “This doesn’t feel simple.” He walked away.

Will continued his healing spell and watched and the wounds on Hannibal’s face slowly closed back up. “I feel like I’ve brought you into my world.” Here he was, trying to heal the effects away.

“I got here on my own,” Hannibal replied, some of his normal coolness returning even with the tiny smile. “But I appreciate the company.”

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For his reputation, it was vital that Hannibal be seen among the nobility the very next day after the incident with Tobias Budge. If he did not, the other nobles would deem him weak or unfit for the risks of court life. Fortunately, some absence would be excused as the incident was not an assassination attempt, but a killer come to call.

Tobias Budge did him a favor. To his fellow nobles, he was far more interesting than ever. The Nevarran that was targeted by a repeat murderer amongst their midst. Some found it romantic, others mysterious. There was also some that found it suspicious (he doesn’t know how many times he had to hear someone insinuate that the two of them were lovers), but he managed to curate the rumors in a way that kept that suspicion in his favor and not in the

minds of Seekers of Truth. Luckily for him, the Seekers of Truth that he ran around with had much lower tolerance for the ostentatious frivolity of nobles and that included their interests.

Over the course of the day, he went to a brunch, a luncheon, and invited the Empress to dinner (which she publicly accepted, but privately refused). Feeling that he had sufficiently played around publicly enough, Hannibal decided to visit his peer.

Bedelia, of course, was less happy to see him.

“Only a day and you already are working for more alliances.”

“It does one well to not seem weak in the eyes of the court,” he replied, just to see her eye twitch.

It did.

“And you couldn’t be bothered to step away?”

He serenely stated, “There is simply too much for me to do, Bedelia. Halamshiral will be occupying me for a while I think.” The faintest downward curl of her mouth told him all he needed to know about her thoughts on that. Really, Bedelia? She wanted him gone already. That was disappointing.

“And what of mourning?” she pointedly asked, voice a tight thin line.

“We are all mourning Lord Froideveaux in our own way,” Hannibal replied. He was mourning the senseless death more than anything else. Sad to say that, other than the man’s family, he was probably one of the very few mourners. He wasn’t a bad man; simply not cut out for politics. “Will you ever stop mourning?” he asked her in return.

She stilled, not stiffened. There wasn’t enough of a change in movement for it to properly stop. It was the ending of movement before it really began.

“That requires a certain allotment of responsibility that has yet to occur.”

Wistfully, he replied, “I feel responsible for what happened to Franklyn.”

She sighed and her body finished the paused movement back into her seat. “Everyone is still responsible for their own life. Responsibility is shared, not placed. Even you can’t give it to yourself.”

“Did you?”

Her brows furrowed at the query. “Did I…?”

“Did you share responsibility when you were attacked by your patient?”

A quiet, contemplative noise was made before she answered, “Yes, but not for his death.”

He smiled, “Nor should you.”

The two of them sat, finishing off the wine. Quiet joined them in the room as they dwelled on responsibility and the nature of its allotment.

Chapter End Notes

I have my reasons for making the kiss be between Beverly and Will, but it was sure as hell difficult to write. I had to ask my mom for cheesy and awkward romcom stuff to figure out how the hell it happened. I had the beginning and the end of the scene written, but was unsure how to make the kiss actually occur on-screen. It was rough.

Fen'Harel enansal

Chapter Summary

People are forced to face the reality of the world around them, some more than others.

Chapter Notes

08/31/24: Not yet edited

Fen'Harel enansal: The Dread Wolf's Blessing

Sorry about the lateness of this chapter, everybody. Been fighting off a pretty bad depressive episode and it's made it difficult to work on this thing.

I'm probably going to take a break for a month, maybe longer. Well, less like a break and more like an extension. I had hoped to have the first part done by the New Year, but holidays are stressful and I am currently trying to study for my GRE. I'll still keep people updated over tumblr and if you want to message me, I'll make sure to reply.

Basically, I'm hoping that between everything going on, I can keep writing and catch myself up before the holidays are over. Trying to be prepared for Part 2 and all. I might still post, but it will definitely be more sporadic until everything's over.

I'll try and keep posting the codices, though.

Another note. There is a very large time jump in this chapter. If anyone wants it, send me some prompts for this universe for the moments that have happened so far. In the main story, I'm sticking to the main threads, but I'm hoping to do an interlude section at some point for some interesting tidbits.

Abigail cried down into her hands, trying to keep herself from hurling. Alana had taken her down to the Chantry again today and asked her to speak with other girls dealing with similar situations to the one she was in, but she didn't want to talk with them. The move to Halamshiral had made it easy to divorce herself from her father. She didn't have to see the same people everyday; the same people wouldn't be watching her warily or with pity. The only reminders were Hannibal, Alana, Will, and the Seekers of Truth. At least three of those people liked her and, for the most part, didn't treat her like she was made of glass. Will had a little, but he promised that he would get better.

Now, she had to confront it again. She could taste the salt of the tears in her mouth as she spoke about things that she had never told anyone, "Every day I wake up and I hear my dad's voice, like he was kneeling next to my bed. I hear him whisper over and over again what he told me." The brunette broke down and sobbed. "He told me he killed those girls again and again so that he wouldn't have to kill me." She rubbed her eyes, feeling the redness of them in the heat from her tears. "I wish he was still alive so I could ask him what I made him feel? What was so wrong with me that he wanted to kill-"

"He should have killed you," came a voice to her left. A young woman sat there, pale skin and brown hair and blue eyes. If it wasn't for the eyes, the woman would look just like her. She was in a white dress with red blood stains on it. "He should have killed you," the young woman repeated. "So that he wouldn't have killed me."

A voice to the left proclaimed, "So he wouldn't have killed me." Another girl that looked just like her, eyes sunken in and almost gone.

Abigail looked around and noticed that she was surrounded by other girls that looked like her.

"So that he wouldn't have killed me!"

Brown hair.

"So that he wouldn't have killed me!"

Blue eyes.

"So that he wouldn't have killed me!"

Pale skin.

"So that he wouldn't have killed me!"

Plain, but pretty.

"So that he wouldn't have killed me!"

The voices kept going as they shouted and accused her. Abigail clutched at her ears and tried to block them out, but as soon as they really started going, they stopped. She glanced up and saw Nicholas Boyle, his clothes bloody and his general person unwashed. He appeared just as he did when he died.

He was the only one with her now and the young man stared right at her.

"He should have killed you, so that you wouldn't have killed me."

Abigail's eyes flew open and she stiffened on the bed. It was always when she was first waking that she realized that the bed she was in was too soft. For once, she was glad of the sinking feeling in the mattress. It was almost like she could press herself into it and disappear.

She wasn't able to stay there for long. As soon as she had almost fallen back asleep, the warm blankets were yanked off the bed, taking her foot with it.

"Up!" shouted Nesiraya as she began opening the curtains and letting bright light enter the room. It wasn't noon yet, but the sun was searing. Now, she had long since had an idea why Nesiraya suggested that she have an east-facing room and did not like it. Another curtain was thrown open and the light pushed underneath her lids.

Sleep was a precious thing and lately Abigail had been getting a lack of it. The nightmares had become worse ever since Alana had decided to resume having 'talks' with her. Logically, she knew the woman was just trying to help her out before she ended up going to court and facing people who would push the trauma plainly back in her face, hidden behind a smile. That didn't make her feel any better about it. There was also an important date coming up, now that Spring was in full-force. She wasn't ready for it, now that it was almost here.

It wasn't fun when people tried to remind you of the stuff that you've gone through. Abigail didn't mean in the way where it was just talking about the actual shit she dealt with. No. What bothered her was being reminded that it happened in the first place. The too comfy bed and soft clothes were already constant reminders that she wasn't at home, but having to talk about what Alana thought happened… it was too much.

Nesiraya didn't care though and that helped.

Said elven woman was currently getting in her face. "I said it was time to get up. The Empress has the debut coming up soon and I want to make sure your dagger work is adequate so you can be on your own for a few hours." Wonderful. Adequate enough for her to be alone for a few hours? Maker what was wrong with these people. The more she learned, the more she pitied the girls back home that still thought about such a life with romanticism.

Eventually, she rolled out of bed and got dressed in plain clothes before Nesiraya gave her a look. Sighing, she put on the fancy outerwear that she knew would be expected of her after the debut. Abigail thought the whole thing was just ridiculous (and knew that Nesiraya agreed), but what she thought and what was 'practical for training' were two very separate things.

Luckily, a recent fashion for younger women had been wearing pants with their dresses, so she got that much. The shirt was a bit of nonsense with puffy, loose sleeves and at least three different layers that still managed to be the same shirt. If they weren't arranged just right, you had immense difficulty doing any sort of strenuous movement. Abigail had managed to talk everyone into giving her something with a high collar, but Nesiraya pointed out that a lot of the court would probably know about the scar and might think her weak for hiding it.

One day, she would feel confident enough to expose her scar, but not for now. The concession was enough for Nesiraya to leave it alone.

Eventually they entered a small practice room that Hannibal and Alana had gotten sectioned off for these lessons. The elven woman tossed her a blunt dagger, carefully weighted and made for her. A present from the three people that were bringing her into this world of politics and intrigue.

Would Will have gotten her a dagger? Probably not.

Nesiraya clucked. “First stance. I want to see how you manage with that monstrosity on.”

“Really?” Abigail replied. She wouldn’t admit it to anyone else, but she was aware of how whiny it sounded.

Nesiraya chuckled, “Just be glad it isn’t a dress. Your footwork suffers enough; I don’t need to see it fighting with a massive skirt.”

Abigail settled: feet apart but not too far, one carefully placed back, arms ready to protect the core and face, light on the toes, dagger grip firm, but not tight, shoulders back. Nesiraya nodded.

“When will I be able to fight with a real blade?” asked Abigail as she began demonstrating the defensive maneuvers she had been taught. Slowly, she moved from one stance to the next, making sure to keep her limbs graceful and loose. This was all about being able to change direction. Nesiraya had told her that if someone was working with a dagger, the goal isn’t to overpower the opponent; it was to hit them where they are the weakest. Exploiting a small gap in a person’s armor worked far better than smacking them around until they were too tired to get up. She was tiny and not especially physically impressive. Far better for her to work around an opponent than go through.

Abigail had lost attention for a moment and stumbled on an uneven bit of the floor, dropping her blunt dagger on the weakest part of the boot. Her hopping around and hissed breaths made Nesiraya laugh.

“You can get a sharp blade when I can be sure that you won’t stab yourself in the foot.”

Eventually the young brunette settled and tried to reposition. “I thought you were always a proponent of ‘lessons hard-learned are hard-forgotten’.”

Her teacher shrugged, “I’m also a fan of not watching my student panic over a little bit of blood.”

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Blood was everywhere. It had seeped into the cracks between the stones of the Imperial Highway. The scene had been discovered by a few merchants trying to get into Halamshiral early that morning, only a few hours from where Will was staying in the Alienage. It was placed at the crossroads where a person could get off the Highway to follow a road south into the Dales, probably to a farming village.

The merchants had run that way, screaming about demons and Dalish curses. It was shortly after that a bird had flown in from the village’s guard to Halamshiral’s, demanding that the Seekers of Truth get down there.

Then scene itself was clearly some sort of blood magic ritual. Even a layman could tell that. Glyphs and runes were painted in the blood of seventeen surprisingly well-preserved bodies.

Of course, the only reason that they knew there were seventeen bodies is because they had seventeen heads. Only one body was completely intact, and that was the one in the middle. It was a young man, completely stripped bare and spread out, the main offering. The sixteen heads were placed at the points of the cardinal directions and sub-directions: North, North-Northeast, Northeast, East-Northeast, East, etc. The body parts were spread out in piles divided out into even quadrants by the cardinal directions.

It was a gory, disgusting mess. Will had seen a lot of horrible things in his life, but this definitely was up there.

“Someone had a really good time with this art piece,” Beverly greeted him with. “I’m still trying to figure out which arm goes with which head.”

“A matching game?” asked Brian.

“No, it’s an art installation,” Jimmy snarked.

“What does it mean then?”

Jimmy paused for a moment before continuing, “They’re trying to tell us about the meaninglessness of individuality. We are all just interchangeable parts.”

Will chimed in, “Then why the whole body in the middle?”

“A key? Or an example? I don’t know.”

Jack came over, “What’s going on?”

“Just discussing our current art installation, esteemed leader,” Beverly said with a bow, receiving a massive bit of side-eye for her effort. He sighed.

He turned to Will. “We’ve tried figuring out which ones are the most recent victims, but it appears they all were at the mercy of some sort of preservation glyph until they were placed. It’s impossible to tell for sure. If I had to wager, it would be the centerpiece. It doesn’t appear to have a trace of magic on it, but still seems remarkably well-preserved.”

“Had to use them for his sick ritual and couldn’t let them decompose too early,” Brian scoffed.

Will got closer to the blood circle and stood at the very edge. “Why did they kill you?”

He felt Jack staring at his back before the man eventually turned around and walked away. Distantly, Will heard him calling for them all to leave as he watched the congealing blood drying against the stone in clumps. The people began to clear out until it was just him.

The elf stared a bit longer, unwilling to go under just yet. This was specifically blood magic; he knew it. The odds of a demon greeting him on the other side were incredibly high. Longing for a Seeker to come back came, which was strange. Apparently, he had gotten to the point in his life where the prospect of a demon meant that their presence was comforting.

Although, he quickly came to terms with it as he only trusted Jack and his squad. Besides, it's not like they could make the demon go away; that was going to be his job.

They weren't going to tolerate him waiting for much longer, so Will opened up his depleting bag of herbs and chewed. A few gulps from his waterskin flushed it into his system; he closed his eyes and waited.

He was in the clear. The world around shimmered with uncertainty and wavered in form. It was a copy of this section of the Imperial Highway, but the landscape around the area had shrunk down. He could see the edges of the world. Will stepped up to the ritual site, only seeing pristine and bare ground. There were several spirits lingering about the area, but, as expected, what greeted him was a demon.

It was a demon of Pride, the most dangerous kind. If they were not born as they were, they came from spirits of Wisdom, Command, Confidence, Faith, and so many others. They were the most dangerous, because they were the most like mortals, as manipulative and enticing as a desire demon with enough emotional control and a penchant for cruel irony that could only come from those that lived beyond the Fade.

The demon shook its head in lieu of the expected greeting. "I have heard about you, little mage. I thought, perhaps, to try and take my chances with a dreamer, but it appears you have been claimed by another."

That was…. Most worrying. "Claimed by another?" Will asked and the demon tilted its head.

"You do not know? Perhaps I still have a chance to aid you. My name is Hybris and I was here to see how I can help."

Will rolled his eyes (or as best he could when one's form is a manifestation of self in a dream). "I am no simpleton, Hybris."

"Of course you are not! In fact, you are in the best position to help your Seekers because you are not," Hybris replied. "I am here, because I have heard through the rumor mill that you are seeking a way to stop the Highwayman."

That gave him pause. His innermost self screamed at him to stop listening, but being able to stop the Highwayman would be a great boon. "What exactly would you plan to do?"

"Now now, you know that's not how this works. If I give too much away, where will I be? I will grant you this: I have sat in on many of his scenes. The man is an artist in his medium, but I am perfectly content to see the world rid of him. You are the only one that can do so."

Those last words sent alarm bells through his brain and Will visibly retreated. The demon Hybris seemed to realize that it had overstepped its bounds. "My apologies, but I am not interested," Will said, hoping that his rejection would not cause the demon to attack.

It did not. It did an approximation of a shrug and stated, "Suit yourself. I'll be keeping an eye on you though, just in case. One never knows when they might require an extra bit of help." With that, Hybris disappeared, leaving Will alone with the Fade's Imperial Highway.

So many other spirits were meandering through the area and several were already re-enacting scenes throughout history. It was strange, Will never took this long locating a spirit to help him before; maybe it was Hybris blocking them off? It was always possible. Eventually, a small spirit approached, practically a demon itself, one of Purpose transforming into Desire. It was spirit enough that it wouldn't be dangerous for it to lend itself to him, but spirits could be just as dangerous as demons if they wanted. Purpose was fairly benign, all things considered.

He allowed the spirit to fill him and take him back to the ritual that infected it.

There was fresh slush on the ground, the last bit of snow as spring moved into its second month. He had been working on this ritual, perfecting it. It had taken over a year to properly plan this and grab all of the ingredients that he needed.

He pulled the cart forward and used the bulk to blockade one half of the highway. Some barriers that he had placed there on previous visits while scouting the site were more than enough for the other half. He uncovered the back of it, showcasing a young man lay snugly between sixteen preserved bodies. He was bound hand and foot and gagged so that he didn't arouse suspicion from anyone on the road.

He dragged them out, one by one, making sure to cradle the living one before placing him in the road. It wouldn't do to toss him out and end up with him dead before the whole thing began.

He butchered them, dragging their bodies through the mucky road to where he needed it. Their blood was too stiff and useless it this point, but he made sure to work with what little they gave him. The boy stared at him, wild-eyed. It was important that the boy watched him work; he needed to understand what was about to happen.

Each part, each head, each drop of blood was placed with precision.

Finally, he added his own blood to the mix, drawing out the symbols that would allow this to work. It had to work.

He placed his own offering in the middle. The boy struggled against his hold, but was too weak after such a period of time spent without much food or drink. It still strained his arms to carry him, but he couldn't afford the mess and work that would come with his squirming. Dragging him through symbols would mean having to start over, and he had already lost so much moonlight.

The boy's blood would finish this. His grand purpose would be fulfilled.

All it needed was a quick stab through the heart. No hesitation. That was what he gave it. What little connection they had was nothing compared to this.

He stood up and stepped back, willing his essence to flow through the magic. He stared at the beauty of it, waiting for the fruits of his labor.

It began to glow and he fought a smile.

It won and breached his face when it very quickly turned into a frown.

Will was not at the site. He wasn't even on the Imperial Highway. He was inside of Comte Hannibal Lecter's suite in the Winter Palace, frantically trying to find a piece of the puzzle that would show him why he was here. Was it just a dream? Was he still in the Fade?

The door to the study opened, Hannibal peering out of it at him. "I'm so sorry, Will. I wasn't expecting you."

This… this isn't right.

"I don't know how I got here!" Will yelled. Hannibal was kind enough to allow him into the study with no argument. He didn't even know how he got into the Palace, let alone the suite. They were several hours outside of Halamshiral. How did this happen?

"Clearly, you are here. As far as I can tell, that includes safely. There aren't any visible wounds, unless there is something that you have not told me about?"

"You don't understand! I was out on the Imperial Highway towards Lydes. It had taken us a few hours to get there and everything. There wasn't any magic or anything! I was along the road, I blinked, and then I was here."

"You have been sleepwalking lately," Hannibal tried to soothe.

"All of my visits to the Fade that are induced by herbs only last an hour at most! Several hours? Without waking?"

"Ah," Hannibal said. "You lost time."

Will began pulling on his hair. "Something is wrong with me! I- I don't know, but it can't be demons. Wouldn't I notice?"

"I imagine that demon powerful enough to get inside you would have to be far too subtle for you to notice," Hannibal remarked, which prompted a "not helping" from Will. "It could be stress."

"When is it ever just stress?" Will snapped back at Hannibal's calm face and voice.

"Our minds do strange things to protect themselves. A retreat from reality sounds like a normal coping mechanism for one that has been enduring repeated abuse."

Will growled, "I am **not** abused."

Hannibal's face did not change. "Will. We have talked repeatedly about the fact that your work causes you induce going into the Fade far more often than you used to. Not only that, but you are a very empathetic person that has to endure re-enactments of horrible things. It is going to overwhelm you."

"I know," he replied, hearing the truth in Hannibal's words.

Somehow, Hannibal's face went from placid to unamused with only a single nose twitch. "Yet you choose to continue. That is the abuse I am referring to."

"You want me to quit?" Will scoffed. "I'm in a precarious enough position as it is; if I leave than the Seekers will come after me." Hannibal opened his mouth to speak, but WIll continued, "And don't say that you'll protect me. Jack may be fond of you and see the potential damage in going after a close friend of the Empress, but Lord Seeker Prurnell may not. They don't like being reminded that politicians can have more power than they."

"Jack gave you a chance. You could have left. It was an opportunity and he might have even covered for you," Hannibal pointed out. Another thing that someone didn't like being reminded of. "Why didn't you?"

"I-" Will stopped. Why hadn't he? Jack really would have tried to let him go. A head start into the Wilds where no one would ever find him. The Seeker wouldn't have been able to protect him after, but he doubted anyone on the squad, including Brian, would have actually tried to look for him. What was his reason? "I save lives," Will decided.

Was that a good one?

"And that feels good?"

"I would like to think so," Will bit out.

"What about yours?" Hannibal asked and Will could only stare. "I may be your sponsor, but I also would like to consider you my friend. I don't care about the lives you save; I care about your life. Continuing the way you have been, without any attempt at recovery, is definitely not caring for it."

"It's not just that!" Will exclaimed. "Yes, I've been doing that more often. Yes, it is because of the work. You don't understand! Even when I was experiencing the potential extent of my powers for the first time, it wasn't this bad. That is always when mage's experience of the world around is the worst, because of the newness of the Fade and magic."

Will sat then and rubbed his face, trying to collect himself. He felt Hannibal generally hovering nearby. "Maybe the work isn't helping, but this has to be something else. None of this makes sense if it isn't."

"You were specifically at a crime scene, when you blacked out," Hannibal declared with surprising intensity. "It wasn't random dream, it was in a place that caused harm. You're trying to blame this on something other than what it is."

Will glared and eventually Hannibal backed off. "Tell me about the scene; maybe I can help you with it."

Deep breath in…

Then out.

"It was a blood magic ritual."

Hannibal did seem slightly surprised at that, even if it was only his mouth opening and closing for a moment. “Are you certain?”

Will nodded. “I thought maybe it was someone just imitating one, but no. I could taste the tang that comes with that type of magic. I don’t know if whatever they did worked the way they wanted it to, but it certainly had an effect on the environment.”

“No wonder your mind needed an escape. The sheer amount of demonic activity in the area.”

“Was terrible, yes,” Will conceded. Any arguments that he would have to say otherwise were ultimately worthless right now.

“I’m worried about you, Will.”

He sighed, “I’m worried about me, too.”

He felt breathing in the air next to him and turned to see that Hannibal had approached. “Seeker Crawford has you mind wrapped and warped around the Fade, bundled up into it along with all of the spirits and demons that hold court in the areas you visit. Your empathy is so strong that you can understand them, alien though they are. I’m worried…”

Hannibal paused, collecting the right words. “Will. I’m worried that you’ll understand one maybe a little too much. What if you left them in and hurt yourself or someone else? I don’t want to see you wake up one day and find your body not your own.”

There was nothing Will could adequately say in return, so he didn’t.

After Will’s visit with Hannibal, he knew he needed to see Jack. If he had been absent for so long earlier, who knew what he had done. This was especially a concern because WIll noticed that the sun’s position indicated that it was much later than he had thought it was. He had been on the Highway a little before midday, and it was now evening. There were a couple of extra missing hours that didn’t involve travel. Hopefully nothing bad happened and he could make up a good excuse about his behavior.

Travelling through the barracks alone was an awkward experience today. Will was positive that something had to have happened, but nobody came up to say anything. The only stares that he got were from the normal people that were just discomforted by him being there. Eventually Will made it back to the rest of the group where they were checking over the various bodies. Beverly waved as Will approached.

He awkwardly shuffled for a moment before asking, “Where’s Jack?”

Beverly seemed slightly taken aback by his behavior and pointed him to the Knight-Captain’s office. “He’s sending some messages to headquarters. I think he’s hoping for some sort of back-up. Mentioned something about a cabal?”

Will nodded and went in to see Jack.

The man was resting his elbows against the desk, forehead in his hands. A letter was spread out in front of him and the ink had just barely finished drying. A quill was laying on the desk,

ink dripping off the nib. The Seeker looked up when Will entered and gave a silent greeting.

Will stood there for a moment, trying to think of what to say. Jack didn't try and push him to speak, for which he was thankful. Eventually, "I'm sorry about earlier," came out of his mouth.

Jack's brow furrowed. "Sorry about what?"

He didn't know? Hadn't something happened? He wasn't himself for hours! If Jack hadn't noticed something, than maybe it wasn't as dramatic as he thought. None of the rest of the squad had said anything and the guards didn't seem to think anything of him.

Was it really that hidden? If no one noticed, maybe he could keep it a secret for now! Will wouldn't tell anyone, at least until he knew whether or not he was being haunted by a demon. "I wasn't feeling like myself," he said.

In retrospect, probably not the best words for him to go to if he was trying to not worry Jack.

"Not feeling like yourself?" Exactly why those words were the wrong ones.

"I don't mean literally!" Not a lie. He hadn't been feeling at all. "I just felt a little ill and down, nothing out of the ordinary. Haven't been sleeping lately."

"I'm sorry about that," Jack said. "I'm sure the Fade holds no real respite. Is there anything I can do for you? I know a few Enchanters or herbalists that could help out."

"No!" Will interjected, and the concern on Jack's face grew. "Jack," he drew out, trying to make it sound less like fear or anger and more like annoyance. "My night are always bad and they're always going to be bad. We just had such a long respite and then two rather traumatic killers back to back. I suppose another one just had a profound effect on me."

"Will… Is there something you want to tell me?"

Will did his best to roll his eyes and seem casual. "No, Jack."

Jack didn't seem convinced. "Then there's something that you don't want to tell me."

Yes. "I'm fine. After all, if I seemed fine this morning, it probably wasn't as bad as I thought it was. Maybe I was just making the whole thing bigger in my head."

"What do you mean?" Jack asked, but Will could see that he was backing down. His hackles and instincts were no longer raised. Just a little more and he was free for the moment.

"I've just been so worried about my position among you guys and the move made it worse. After what's been happening, I felt like everyone's eyes were on me and just obsessed over perceived mistakes and slights after. In my position, it happens."

"Alright," Jack trailed off, finally calming his apprehension. "But if there's a problem you need to tell me. I'm responsible for everyone on my team and that includes you."

“I understand.”

Jack’s voice grew louder again, but he wasn’t yelling. “This means that if anyone in the guard is giving you a hard time, I need to know too. It’s my job to make sure that they aren’t giving you grief.”

That was… nice. “Everything’s fine,” Will replied. He may not feel like he was okay for now, but maybe it would be.

Eventually.

Now that that was taken care of, Will decided to finish off his evening the way he had been for the last couple of weeks: looking at dead bodies.When he returned to the place where the squad was setting up, Beverly called out to him, “How’d the visit with dad go?”

Will shrugged, “It went okay, I think.”

She gently hip-checked him. “What was with that, earlier?”

“I just felt a little awkward sorry.”

“No need to be. You wouldn’t be the first teammate that I’ve gotten a kiss from.”

Will heard Brian start coughing behind him and Jimmy was laughing profusely. Will did the only thing that he really could in that moment, he blushed. “Was it a good one?” Jimmy shouted to them.

“It was actually not bad,” Beverly replied with a wide smile and WIll reddened deeper.

“Um… How many-” Will began, but turned away for a moment. The rest of them were laughing and generally enjoying themselves. It was so strange, but he felt like maybe… just maybe, he belonged. “How many bodies?” he finally asked.

The bodies in question were organized on individual tables, laid out in a fashion that suggested what their structure might have been in life. There was an extra table with random parts laid on it that had yet to be matched to a specific body.

Brian smiled, now that he wasn’t hacking, and pointed out the individuals. “It seems we have seventeen total. That was the number of heads we found anyway. We’re still sorting through to make sure that we don’t have anything extra.”

Jimmy pointed out the one that was still intact and mostly untouched, the exception being the deep wound over the heart. “Obviously, this one is our center-piece. We managed to get someone to come in and identify it. His name was Joel Summers, recently of Ferelden. Apparently he left to get away from the remnants of the fifth Blight. He was one of the best workers on a farm from Jader but went missing about a month ago.”

“Doesn’t look like he’s been dead a month,” Brian said.

“Could have been a preservation glyph,” suggested Will.

“Would’ve detected traces of magic,” Brian explained. “We found some on all of the corpses, but this one was free, mostly.”

“Probably some stuff done because there was blood magic covering the area, but nothing magical specifically to keep the corpse,” continued Jimmy.

“So this one was fresh. He kept him alive for a month before killing him, but the rest killed at separate times.”

“He was the main sacrifice,” Beverly stated. “Most blood magic rituals just require just blood, but the sheer amount of death involved with this one suggests something else.”

Jimmy joined them as they all walked over to the body of Joel Summers. “I checked and the few that I could identify each disappeared at different times over the last year and a half. What little I could glean places them at month increments.”

Brian frowned, “So our killer took each body one month apart and then did some big ritual with the last one as the center.”

Beverly approached, “What was the ritual for then?”

They looked to Will. “Don’t look at me; I don’t practice blood magic.”

The collective gaze turned to Jimmy, who sighed. “Just because I’m a Templar doesn’t mean I practice this stuff.

“Where can we find books on blood magic to help us identify this that won’t immediately get us watched closely?”

Beverly smiled, “We could get someone to steal them.”

Will and Brian gave her a dubious look. “Bev, I hate to say this, but I don’t think a blood magic book going missing is going to make anyone feel better. If we’re caught with it? Even worse than if we asked for it,” Will reminded her.

“Ugh. Fine. We’re going to have to get it somehow.”

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Abigail looked out the stained glass windows of Hannibal’s study. The trees and flowers were blooming, now that spring was finally in full-swing. The last dregs of winter still remained as slush on the ground. In Red Crossing, that would mean that everyone would begin preparing for full growing season. Some of the farmers would be planting and hunting would be off limits for a while longer while the deer and other animals would grow. Predators were game of course. It almost felt like if she stared hard enough, she would see home again, not that she could go back. It would be any day now.

“They sold my parents’ house,” Abigail told her visitor. Freddie Lounds rested comfortably on a lounge, lazily taking in the study of Comte Lecter and associates. “It stood empty for so

long and no one wanted to clean it. Someone finally got desperate enough to clean it, but no one wants to live there still. They threw out my family's belongings."

"Not that you will get any of it," the bard pointed out. Said bard was only here because Alana and Hannibal were both not. Abigail had caught her snooping around the study and monopolized her time. Partly, this was to keep the ginger from going through her guardians' belongings. The other part was just glad to see someone different. Not being able to leave the suite without escort (and even then only leaving for certain areas with Nesiraya) was extremely isolating. She felt like staying here might make her go crazy.

"I don't want any of it. Besides, I'm pretty sure that once I left, the town picked through most of it anyway. Although they might've done that before, who knows," the brunette mused. It ached, knowing that other people were handling her family's belongings, even as she told Freddie that she didn't want it. She was well aware of the reality of the situation even while she was still in the Chantry. Wanting to keep anything of her old life was childish and naive. Sometimes… Sometimes Abigail thought about every single person in Red Crossing that would be handling her family's things. The Armalds had always envied her mother's cooking ware, painstakingly collected over the years. Her father was bound to still have some herbs left hanging around. Who wouldn't want a knife that had belonged to a murderer?

"You might want to rethink that. Your parents had money, some of it was even saved up for you, for a life that at least one of them thought you could have. Now you won't get a single copper."

"I'm Comte Lecter's ward now. I don't need their money," Abigail protested, but doubt reared up its ugly head. Sure, she was his ward now, but he never declared her his heir. She supposed that he couldn't, seeing as she hasn't been presented at court yet.

"You could make your own," Freddie replied, but Abigail still shook her head.

"How much would you get?" she scoffed.

"Plenty."

"And me, being the poor subject that did so little of the work, would get virtually nothing."

Freddie didn't say anything, which only proved Abigail's point. Then, the ginger said, "You're about to enter court soon, I take it? Would be a shame for them to think so badly of you before you even get to debut?"

Abigail narrowed her eyes, "Are you threatening me?"

Freddie shrugged, "Not particularly; I'm simply stating the facts. When you debut, they are all going to think that you helped your father. They are all going to think that you are using Comte Lecter and Lady Bloom."

"I'm not-"

“It doesn’t matter,” dismissed Freddie. “They are going to think it when they see you, and anything coming out of your mouth will seem like a paltry defense. But. If you get someone to collaborate your story and give it legitimacy, they will have to listen. Tell your own story, and let me help you tell it. You can change what people think; we can do that together.”

Abigail glanced up a Freddie, seeing the manic gleam about her person. The bard declared, “Everyone will know the truth!”

That was what she was afraid of, but if she could control the narrative… Abigail knew that Hannibal had said that sometimes the court suspecting you of something was better than them not suspecting you at all, but she would be going into court with a giant sign on her back that screamed “murderer”. Wouldn’t it be better to be free of that?

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s tell my story.”

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Beverly was not super pleased that she got volunteered for this position. If she was going to be honest, this seemed like a better job for Will, but the boys all voluntold her to get her hands on some spooky shit. At least they weren’t asking her to do something that she couldn’t, she just resented that apparently she was their resident sneak-thief. Will told her to think of it as a compliment. He’s lucky she didn’t drag him down with her.

The first place that she thought of was the off-shoot of the University of Orlais stationed in the city, but they just stayed to themselves and she knew by reputation that their collection was pithy in comparison. Other than fellow Seekers, whom had been looking less and less trustworthy as of late, Beverly wasn’t sure what kind of people might have that information. The Chantry Sisters and Brothers proper could potentially that kind of information, due to the sheer amount of clerics. Usually. The Chantry in Halamshiral seemed to be lacking in scholars. That, and her experience with clerics were that they usually did not explore anything that could upset or contradict the power of the Chantry, with a few notable exceptions such as Brother Genitivi and Sister Petrine.

The only real person that she could think of would have to be Lady, formerly Sister, Bloom. She worked fairly well with the Seekers beforehand and, if what Beverly heard from Will is correct, the woman left the Chantry due to worries about corruption, so she wasn’t denying its faults. Lady Bloom could potentially know where some texts would be that could help them out. If Will is to be believed on this as well, she was living with Comte Lecter. That particular noble is well known for his esoteric and eccentric interests. He has to have some sort of documentation or tome on blood magic.

It occurred to her that that potentially sounded a little judgy or less like an educated guess and more like an assumption. The half-elf put it aside for the moment and continued on in her quest.

She maneuvered her way to their suite and found them just now entering it, arm in arm with what appeared to be a few servants holding garment bags. The pair took a quick look at her armor and both immediately looked extremely concerned. “Is Will alright?” Lady Bloom asked. Comte Lecter nodded in concurrence.

Oh. That's why. Will really needed to get with the program. He was going around kissing her when these two beautiful people were right here? And clearly cared about him? (She cared about him too, but not like that.) Beverly was going to have to have a serious talk with him when she saw him next. Beverly took the moment to quickly explain the situation about needing a text about blood magic in the most vague terms that she could use. Both of them looked progressively more concerned, if you could call subtle twitches concern. The servants around kept peering at the both of them, so she decided to stop talking at ask to speak inside.

Inside… was Freddie Lounds. When the door opened, Abigail Hobbs looked up, startled, while the bard lounged beside her looking like the cat that got the canary. The ginger smirked and turned it on the confused and nervous young woman, "I'll speak with you later, Abigail." She got up and sauntered out.

"Abigail, may I speak with you a moment?" Comte Lecter said and motioned for the young woman to join him in the other room. He turned to Beverly, "Please peruse the library at your leisure. I hope you find what you are looking for." The two left, Lady Bloom remained.

"So, how is being a Seeker? Do you enjoy your work?" she asked while leading Beverly to the library. They crossed arms and made sure not to hurry while the servants were busy organizing everything behind them. A few of them nodded to her in acknowledgement and she nodded back. Being a kid in the Alienage often had its perks, one of which was that the most dangerous spies often left you alone.

"I enjoy it enough," Beverly replied diplomatically. "It's important work and someone has to do it."

"It must be encouraging and fulfilling, fighting corruption and evil." That was odd.

Beverly looked at Lady Bloom and attempted to examine the look on her face. The woman seemed both wistful and determined at the same time, seeing a dream far away and fighting for it. But, it was still only a dream.

"Does the idea appeal to you? It's often a lot messier than that."

"I'm sure it is," was the reply. "But it shouldn't have to be. I envy you and your position. You can do a lot more good there than I can as a noble with only a title."

The Seekers could use this kind of passion. Beverly and Jack had been talking for some time that if often felt like they were from an exceedingly rare breed in their order that actually cared for everyone in the charge, not simply about consolidating power. "Would you be interested in being a Seeker?"

Lady Bloom appeared startled for a moment, as if the idea had occurred to her, but not the offer. "I- I am, actually. I doubt that I could though, I am far too old."

"How old are you?" Beverly asked, mostly teasing.

Her companion sighed, "Old enough to know that I'm only barely considered a young woman anymore."

Beverly shrugged, “I don’t see any problem in it. You’d require some training and the Vigil, of course, but if you worked hard and wanted it that much, then the difficulty wouldn’t matter. How good are you with a sword?”

“Better with a dagger.”

“A bow?”

“Passable.”

“Hmm…” Beverly said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Lady Bloom brightened and swung open the doors to the study and Comte Lecter’s collection. “Let’s roam for a while. No doubt Comte Lecter will be back soon to discuss access with you.”

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“Do I have to drink this?” Abigail asked, gesturing with the cup in her hand.

Will raised an eyebrow at her. “It’s ceremonial. There’s nothing untoward or mind-altering in it.. The whole point of it is to purify the body.”

The brunette raised an eyebrow at him and sipped from the cup. The girl made a face, which caused him to laugh aloud. “Is this a prank or something?”

He shook his head and took back the cup. “Not really. I’ll admit some of it was for my own amusement, but this is really something the Avvar do. It usually is reserved for their Augurs, but their Thanes and those seeking help also drink it to prepare themselves for communicating with the spirits.” The shadow of one was at his back and following his steps, but she didn’t need to know that. It’s presence had been increasing lately.

She shrugged and smiled, “It’s a good think I wouldn’t be an Augur then.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Will replied. “Magic comes in strange ways. Maybe it just came a little later for you.” She didn’t seem reassured by that.

“Will,” she hesitated, then spoke again. Louder. “Will.”

“Yes?”

“Will?”

He turned and he was staring at Beverly. It… it happened again. Another vision of him with Abigail that wasn’t reality. It had been so long that he had lost his concern, but clearly that was not a wise idea. Was he sure that trying to interact with her more was a good idea? It could potentially be a problem, especially when his experience of unreality was fixated on her. What if a demon took advantage of this? He wouldn’t even be aware of it.

Maybe a demon already was. They were known to give people visions and dreams of what they wanted that were so life-like people couldn't tell the difference. He had met a Desire Demon that had ensorcelled a man by making him believe he had a family, a home. Will hadn't known what to do, because the demon was right. The man had been miserable all his life and they were simply giving him something to ease his last days. It had felt wrong at the time (and still did) to leave him enthralled in that falseness, but Will didn't have a chance against the demon anyway.

Beverly waited patiently as he tried to put off speaking with her and gain his bearings. "My apologies," he gave his pathetic excuse. "I was focused on the case and a bit preoccupied. You know how the mind goes."

"Of course," she replied, concern vanishing. Had he imagined that too? "By the way, on a different day, we need to have a serious talk about your taste in partners."

He raised an eyebrow. "Partners?"

"I'm serious Will! We are going to have a talk!" That didn't sound good. Was he in trouble?

"Anyway, I came here for two actual reasons. The first is that I spoke with Alana and Comte Lecter. They agreed to give me access to Comte Lecter's library. We're going to go through his books and see if we can find any resources on blood magic or resources that will lead us to resources on blood magic."

He chuckled, enjoying the fact that his friend was able to make him laugh. Will needed it after the incident preceding. Her face darkened slightly, as if she was thinking about something unpleasant. "The second reason is that Comte Lecter asked to speak with you. It was specifically about Abigail, and Freddie Lounds is involved."

"Freddie Lounds? Of all people?" Will confronted Abigail with when he finally went to speak with her. "I'm trying very hard to be understated when I say that this is a very bad idea."

Abigail glared at him after he had said this to her, clearly not happy to hear his opinion on the subject. Will was very lucky that apparently Hannibal agreed with him. "Freddie Lounds is dangerous, Abigail. She may say that she is trying to help you, but she is a bard. Their only allegiance is to the Game and the coin and prestige it brings them."

Will nodded, "If it gave her anything, she would throw you under a bridge to pay the toll. She's called the Tattler for a reason."

"The decision is made," Abigail declared, standing firmly against them. "I've already heard Alana's lecture and I don't need yours too. I am only telling you and giving you a chance to speak on the matter, because Freddie wants you to be in the book as well. Consider this common courtesy."

Hannibal stiffened next to him. “You are forfeiting our privacy as well as yours.”

“My privacy’s already been forfeited,” she snapped back. “I’m sorry if your private affairs are being dragged into the forefront, but it isn’t nearly as large as the burden placed on me. You both are already the fascination of the court, right? Why does it matter if a moment of common knowledge is clarified?”

“This will change, Abigail. All of it will. The frustration and anger that you’re feeling won’t last. When it does-” Will tried to say.

Abigail interrupted him, “Yes, things change. For instance, you’re here.” A shot of hurt went through Will as Abigail continued to stare. “For a change.”

He had thought they had already gone over this, but apparently she was still hurt. It had only been a couple of busy days; how was he supposed to suddenly make good on his word? The young man understood where Abigail was coming from, he had pulled away from her so suddenly and now he was trying to enforce his authority on her matters.

He wasn’t her dad. Never was and that was never his goal. Was it? Regardless, if he had had any authority once, it was gone. “Abigail,” he pleaded. “You know that you’re important to me. It’s only been a couple of days, please don’t hold that against me.”

She softened. “I know. I just don’t appreciate you, either of you, speaking to me like that. I know I’m not an adult by your standards, but I am my own person. I can make my own decisions. I am writing this book.”

“Abigail,” Hannibal warned, but Will waved him off.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, I can’t help feeling some responsibility for you.”

Hannibal stepped in, “We’ve all been through much, you the most out of all of us. We went through it together. It is important to understand that what you write you write about all of us.”

The younger brunette nodded. “I understand, but I don’t need your permission.”

“And you don’t need our approval, but I hope it would mean something,” Hannibal replied.

“I’m about to step into the world of politics and intrigue with everyone already thinking I’m a murderer and cannibal. A willing cannibal,” she breathed. “I will work to keep you two in the book as minimally as possible to make sure it doesn’t hurt either of your reputations. I just want to be able to set the record straight.”

Will rushed to comfort her, “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Yet,” said Hannibal. “If you open this door, Abigail, you won’t be able to control what comes through.”

Will felt like he was missing something. The other two in the room was almost staring each other down, but without making direct eye contact. It was almost as if they were trying to

keep him from knowing that there was a clash of wills taking place right in front of them. He always thought that Hannibal and Abigail were extremely subtle people, but this was teetering on the edge.

What were they keeping from him?

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As Will and Hannibal left her alone, Abigail heaved slightly. By now, Nicholas Boyle's body was going to turn up. Abigail, for the last couple of weeks, had been sending anonymous messages to some people in Red Crossing and had been subtly working a way to get his body discovered without any one person digging it up. Before she had left, the young woman had visited his body and loosened the earth around it, eventually reburying it in a much shallower grave near a couple of farms.

This... this was for her. Ever since that night, Nicholas Boyle had been turning up in nightmare after nightmare. She ignored it, thinking that nothing would come of it. Even in its new spot, the boy wouldn't be found for some time after its reburial. That was why she didn't bother to move it until she knew she would be leaving; Abigail didn't want to be in town when the scandal would go down.

The winter would have frozen it over. The dirt had been so stiff and difficult to work that the body would be too cool for anything to happen to it. It would swiftly be iced over and preserved for the farmers to find it come thaw. For a time after that happened, the nightmares had gone. Leaving her be.

They had been a month into spring now and the weather was properly turning. The winter had been unusually long. The ice was melting and the farmers would be trying to plant new crops. The earth where the body was would be worked and tilled. Someone was going to find it.

The anticipation of the event had been making her sick and haunting her sleep. She wanted it to be over. She wanted it to be found.

It was going to be any day now. Abigail only had to wait.

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The information that Beverly had gathered with Alana had been Creators-sent. The books that they managed to collect (between Hannibal and Empress Celene) were scattered throughout the room that they had essentially taken over from the guards. All of them were pouring through the knowledge and had learned a lot of interesting theories about magic and such. It took them a couple of days, but eventually…

"I found it!" yelled Beverly. Jimmy, Will, and Brian all ran over to the table that she had taken over.

"What did you find?" asked Will as he approached, being echoed by the other two.

“What the in the Void is that?” asked Brian, peering over her shoulder.

The book was opened wide, revealing a very detailed diagram of the exact same thing that the ritual they had found was. Will glanced over the descriptive text next to it and internally gulped at what he read.

Beverly rushed out her words, “It’s a ritual designed to tear the Veil or at the very least weaken it.”

“I’m slightly confused,” Brian commented. Jimmy decided to explain. Will would’ve at another time, but the prospect of a tear or weakening in the Veil was a lot to take in.

“The Veil weakens naturally in places of death or power, the spirits and demons are heavily attracted to those places, so naturally they pay more attention to them. If this ritual is trying to weaken the Veil, it is very likely that the killer was planning something much bigger. These kind of things tend to preclude a little hoard of demons flooding an are.”

“That’s,” Brian began, but he was trying to search for the right words. “That’s not good.”

“Putting it mildly,” agreed Jimmy.

“Why would anyone want that? Wouldn’t the demons just kill them and then start terrorizing things? If there was something specific-”

“People are dumb, Brian,” said Beverly.

“I have a guess,” Will whispered, but the room itself was so quiet and made of stone that even over the rise of bickering voices, his own was crystal-clear.

“What is it?” Beverly asked.

The elf swallowed and hoped that this waiting wouldn’t come back to bite him in the ass. “When I was reading the scene, I met a demon. It didn’t really do anything and left quickly afterwards, but it had been hovering around the area.”

“A demon?” the three pressed, looking slightly concerned.

“A pride demon. Nothing I can’t handle and, like I said, it left quickly after.”

The other three stared at him before Beverly broke the silence. “So there’s a good chance that our friend was actually trying to summon a demon. Huh.”

“Will!” Jack called, poking his head into the room. Will sent a quick prayer of thanks to the Creators that Jack wasn’t in the room when he revealed the demon and another prayer, this one of aid, that Jack didn’t hear. After their last conversation, that might spark questions he wasn’t ready for. He followed Jack into the corridor, hoping that Jack’ lack of presence in the room meant he was too busy to eavesdrop.

They stood in the hall, staring at each other. It took a few moments for Jack to speak, but once he did Will took back his prayer of aid. “We found Nicholas Boyle’s body near Red

Crossing."

Will would much rather learning that Jack had heard what he just said about the demon.

Seeker Jack Crawford had all of them sit down in the Guard-Captain's office, remaining or more or less his own turf. Will wasn't super excited to see that Hannibal and Alana were joining him; it just made the whole incident feel more real. Jack seemed to have his own opinion about what happened to Jack. Seeing as Will had yet to see the body, he could make no definitive claim as to what happened.

"Nicholas Boyle was found dead."

After nobody said anything for a moment, Jack continued, "He was found among the top soil of a farm. The ground had frozen solid, so none of the farmers ever encountered the body. Spring thaw and the growing season is what caused it to be uncovered."

He paused for a moment and then went in for the killing blow. "There's evidence of reburial. We don't actually know where it was initially hidden or where he was killed. We can't even guess when it was; the fact that it was frozen for an extended period of time upsets our estimates."

Alana swallowed, "How did he die?"

Jack replied, "Knife wound. It looks like the body was gutted. I'm having them transport the body here. It'll be a couple of weeks, but, when it gets here, I want Abigail Hobbs to identify it for us."

Will watched as Hannibal seemed to be studying Jack. "You already know who it is."

"I want Abigail Hobbs to tell me who it is," stated Jack, eyes brimming with determination. He wasn't going to be moved.

"Jack!" Alana chided. "You can't put her in a room with his body! She already has nightmares about him!"

"And why would that be?"

"You can't seriously think she would have had anything to do with this?" Will asked, shocked at Jack's assertion.

Jack remained stubborn in his assessment. Will would admire the man if this wasn't absolutely frustrating. His immobility of his opinion in the matter might cause Abigail to deal with some serious trauma. "I think," Jack said. "She's the common denominator. Her father, Marissa Schurr, Nicholas Boyle… every single incident is somehow related and it's to her."

"That doesn't make her guilty," Will pointed out. Jack wasn't listening.

"My instinct says that she's got answers that I haven't heard."

"What are the questions you're asking?" Will asked. Alana made a noise of agreement.

Jack turned to Alana. “You said that she frequently snuck out when she was living in the Chantry in Red Crossing. Where did she go? Whom was she with?”

Alana gave him a glare. “Any young woman would have snuck out of a place that was keeping them there, especially a Chantry where they didn’t enter willingly. All of the Sisters confessed to doing the same at one time or another when they were young. It’s natural.”

Hannibal turned to Alana, “I do not believe that matters right now.”

“It doesn’t,” Jack agreed.

“This is a bad idea,” Alana said.

“I’d like you to observe then. Tell me how much of a bad idea it was when we’ve dealt with it. We might just get the answers we want.”

“I want to be there,” Will said.

Jack shook his head. “No, Will. I have better things for you to worry about.” He turned to stare at the younger man. “Such as the murders we’re currently dealing with.”

“They’ll be done by the time the body gets here.”

“Sixteen murders are a lot to do in two weeks, and there’ll probably be more after. Focus on your job and we can discuss Nicholas Boyle later.”

Will stood up and walked out of the room, leaving Jack sighing. He stood in the hall for a moment, breathing deeply to try and calm himself. This could hurt Abigail so badly, exposing her to something like this. Yes, she was getting stronger every day, but this could cause some regression or force her to relive what happened. He wanted her to keep getting stronger, not retreat. She was already dealing with so much.

Alana and Hannibal came out and greeted him. Apparently Jack had sworn them to secrecy and asked him to come back in, probably to have him do it, too. Will reluctantly acquiesced. What else could he do?

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Hannibal and Alana had left immediately for a meeting with Jack Crawford. The Seeker hadn’t even given them a chance to say goodbye; he only gave swift and courteous apologies before rushing them out of the door. Abigail had a feeling why. It was time then.

Restlessly, she had been moving through the suite, trying to get her bearings and figure out how she was going to react when they returned. This was mostly for Alana’s benefit, as Hannibal knew the truth of the matter and what had actually happened. She needed to be shocked and more than a little nervous. Undoubtedly, the former Sister was expecting her to think that someone was going to come for her next. She needed to perfect her simple worry when they returned, that way it didn’t seem like she had been constructing this image while they were gone.

Upon their arrival, nothing of the sort happened. Both of them explained it away as them having to give advice to the Seeker on how to handle a matter that had to do with the court. Something simple. The young woman pried slightly, looking for purchase to get actual answers to her question, to know avail. When it became apparent that any more would make Alana suspicious, she ceased.

They settled for a moment, before Beverly showed up. Abigail remembered her from the times that she had stayed with Will, one of his friends. The woman greeted her warmly before asking for Alana. Apparently the two had a meeting.

Hannibal gave Alana some gentle teasing about a paramour which caused her to playfully glare. She didn't deny it though, so Abigail waggled her eyebrows at Alana as the woman left. Alana rolled her eyes and smiled fondly, some of the tension she held easing out of her body.

So, Abigail was alone with Hannibal. The man was still wearing his outerwear and moved to the window. Before the brunette could decide what she was going to do for a while, her guardian spoke.

"Jack Crawford has sworn us to secrecy, but I believe our own secret supersedes his. They've found Nicholas Boyle."

For all her practicing and all of her rehearsing, actually hearing the words come out of someone's mouth sent a jolt of fear through her. It wasn't just guessing. All of the strange relief and regret she felt when neither of them said anything fled and took the strange sense of calm with it. He was really out there. They really found him.

He was still talking: "It can be a comfort to see the broken, bloated corpse of a monster and know it can never come back."

"But he wasn't really a monster, was he?" She had known that. Right after he collapsed, no longer staring shocked at her knife, she had known.

"Were you?" Hannibal challenged.

"I sometimes feel like one." There wasn't much more to say. She felt like one of those ogres in tales, hidden away in a place to keep people from being afflicted with her monstrosity. A caged thing that needed to be watched.

"Why did you uncover the body, Abigail?" His voice was strangely flat.

She shuddered. "I-" She couldn't find the words.

"Would this be a chapter in your book?"

Hastily she yelled, "No!" His Lordship blinked at her. "It won't be. Neither would killing him or you helping me hide his body. I just needed-"

"What did you need, Abigail?"

“I needed to see him and-” She paused. “I think I needed to know that he wasn’t just something for me. That there was a world around him. If there wasn’t, then he wasn’t really real! If the world went on without Nicholas Boyle, then he was never there.”

“Abigail, they are going to want you to see him.”

“I know.”

He rose up, becoming impossibly taller. “You have brought the scrutiny of the Seekers of Truth upon us and this house. He’s going to be watching us closely.”

“So?” Abigail declared. “You were right when you mentioned the book. I’m opening a door. It’s opened. I can’t control what comes through, but I can control when.”

“Were you trying to control when all those months ago?”

“Yes. I kept having nightmares about him being found and as soon as we were going to move, I reburied him. I knew when he was most likely coming up.”

“That’s a lot of variables to account for,” Hannibal responded, maintaining that strange stillness she had come to associate with him. “What would have happened had he been discovered sooner?”

“What does it matter?” she asked, genuinely confused. “He wasn’t. He was found when I wanted him to be and I don’t have to dread its coming anymore.”

Hannibal walked away, leaving her for the study. She followed closely behind, but kept enough of a distance that she could dodge, should he lunge. Somehow, Abigail knew he wouldn’t, but the newfound instincts drilled into her by Nesiraya allowed for no fools. Once they reached the threshold, Hannibal turned back to her.

“By doing this without informing me, you have betrayed my trust. Both of our lives are now in danger, thanks to this stunt. I deserve more than that.” He walked in and blocked her from joining him. “I need to trust you, Abigail. What if I can’t?” Hannibal shut the door.

Abigail was left alone in the main room of the suite, the person responsible for her life now on the other side of the door.

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Jack Crawford had taken him aside for a moment before the storm truly leapt out at them. The others were allowed to rummage through the books and he was not (being a mage and all). Jack assured him that it wasn’t his choice, which Will believed. If he was being honest, Will got the feeling that the Seeker probably wouldn’t have much of an issue with blood magic if it weren’t so destructive and if it didn’t involve murder a lot of the time. Will had heard that some people could get by on only hurting themselves, willing allies, and even enemies and Jack was a man that saw practical use in most anything.

No, the problem was that if anyone saw a mage being allowed to read books on blood magic and it wasn’t one of these four people, there was a chance that they would flip their shit.

Then, they would all be in trouble.

So the rest of the squad got to look through Comte Lecter's more fascinating tomes and he was stuck here, talking with Jack about money. Specifically, Jack was trying to find a discrete way to give him more. The man also tried to get him to subtly-not-so-subtly see a healer. Apparently Bella had said something to him and Jack was even trying to recommend some regimens that hers had suggested. The only purpose this served was Will feeling more uncomfortable.

Thank the Creators that Beverly burst in and interrupted him. "We got it!" she cried, startling both Will and the usually unflappable Jack.

"Katz, what in the void-"

"Jack! We got it!" Jimmy yelled as he rushed up.

Jack sighed and motioned for Will to go meet with the rest of the squad with him. "What's this about?"

"We finally managed to get a lock down on the identity of our final victim and potentially the killer," Beverly said. Will and Jack looked at each before Jack motioned for them to go on.

Brian cleared his throat, "I actually recognized him. I felt like I had known him before, but couldn't place him. This was Joel; he was actually raised in the same Chantry as I was. A full Brother and everything as far I know. Well, knew."

"Okay," Will drew out. Who the last victim was didn't outright mean anything, but clearly they were trying to go somewhere. Best just to let them get there on his own; he had learned that from Beverly.

"Well, the children in the Chantry I was in were all the ones without parents that had been dedicated as babies in one way or another. Mine was from an illicit coupling that broke several vows." Here Brian looked slightly amused, but Will got the impression of old pain. It was the kind a person only found funny because of how many times they forced themselves to make it so. Eventually, that's just what it became. "I never knew why Joel was there, most of us had been told at one point and shared with the rest of them, but apparently he was never told. I did some digging and found that Joel was the result of a Circle mage and a Templar getting together."

Ouch. "Yeah," said Brian. No one had said anything, but the thought was clear on their faces. The mother died giving birth, which left the mage father. I checked in with the Circle that Laurence was supposed to be in and apparently he disappeared from the tower several years ago."

"That would be plenty of time to start researching and planning!" Jimmy declared.

"So a mage has a kid with a Templar, what next?"

Jimmy jumped in, “Templars and mages are not encouraged to ‘fraternize’ with each other. Some of the Chantry would prefer us not even make friends with the mages.”

“I’m sure that encouraged cooperation,” muttered Will. Jimmy nodded at him enthusiastically.

“I had trouble obeying that rule. Honestly, it was why I joined the Seekers. A sympathetic Knight-Captain mentioned me to Jack and he took me in.”

Jack grouched, “You got in on your merits and attitude, Jimmy, not someone’s request or recommendation.” Jimmy just shrugged at him. Will got the impression that this conversation happened often, although Will hadn’t heard it before.

Will closed his eyes and tried to reach the headspace needed, only for a moment. Then it struck him: “He wanted to tear the veil to change what happened.”

“What?” Beverly asked, edging closer to him.

“The Fade is the realm of dreams. Granted, most people, excepting Dreamers, can’t really shape it, but they do influence it involuntarily. There was a demon attracted to the ritual, so it must have been powerful enough that, if successful, it would bring in something,” Will explained. “He wanted to let the dreams in so that he could have his. Maybe he thought it would give him what he wanted. I can almost guarantee that a demon probably put him up to it and told him to make his son the final sacrifice. Something precious to ensure his dream would come true and wouldn’t upset or contradict it.” Will breathed in heavily through is nose and expelled the last thought to his audience. “He couldn’t accept reality. He wanted to make a new one and live in denial.”

Jack and Will found the mage, Laurence, in a small shack not too far from Halamshiral. It wasn’t pretty.

The man that they found was starting to lose a lot of weight and rummaging around the shack talking to his ‘son’ and ‘wife’. What was actually there was a desire demon playing all of the rolls that he required. It was uncanny, hearing all of the different voices come out of it. Will pitied Laurence. He thought that what he was doing would give him a family, but what he was really getting was the last bit of his life being fed on by a demon.

The demon looked up at them when they walked in and eyed them both. Its look to Jack was more of distrust and wary, but it looked at him hungrily. That wasn’t reassuring, so he moved to stand a bit behind Jack.

“Who brings visitors to our lovely home?” the desire demon said, voice reverberating against the walls, a little echo chamber.

Jack pulled out his bastard sword, but otherwise remained non-hostile. Posturing and preparation was the name of the game when demons were involved. “We’re the Seekers of Truth and we’ve been looking for this man for quite some time.”

“Whyever could that be?” the demon asked, amusement lacing the tone.

“He’s killed a lot of people and we’re here to bring him to justice.” After Jack said that, the demon’s eyes flashed slightly, their purple hue deepening. Will moved behind Jack as slowly as possible, trying to put the man with special anti-magic powers in front of him. He could see that Jack was moving in front of him at the same speed, so at least they had the same idea.

“Justice is so very boring. The man you see doesn’t even remember doing the crimes, nor does he have a reason to. Why bother?”

“Because he still committed them.”

Its eyes narrowed as it saw the Seeker come to fully stand in front of Will and plant himself between the desire demon and the elf mage. Will looked around him slightly to continue to watch the action. Laurence yelled back to them, “Darling? What’s going on over there?”

Its voice changed to something light and feminine, “Don’t worry my dear. We just have some guards checking in on us! Apparently there is a dangerous criminal about.”

“Glad to know that our men-at-arms care about the common man,” Laurence chortled back. He turned and resumed trying to cook at the banked and decaying hearth.

“This is wrong,” rushed out of Will. The demon fixed its gaze on him.

“And why would that be?”

“This is a lie,” Jack said and turned his head to fix him with a gaze that said ‘shut up’. “This man is trapped in a dream, but it’s a trick.”

“So?” the demon said and the otherworldly flames attached to its body flared brighter. “I’m making him happy! I’m making him harmless!” it yelled. “As a result, I get fed and get to experience this with him! What’s so wrong about that?”

It dawned on Will, “This isn’t the first time that you’ve done this.”

It huffed. “No, it isn’t. The last party that confronted me saw that I was right. I’m making sure he doesn’t harm someone while giving him exactly what he wants.”

“It’s going to kill him when you’re done.”

It glared at them. “Isn’t that what you’re going to do?”

Everything was quiet as they stared at the demon. Something in its face changed and it smiled at the both of them. "You understand what it's like. To want something so badly that you would give anything up for it." It turned to Will. "Your Clan, your new family. Wouldn't

you do anything for them?" It turned to Jack. "What about your wife? Wouldn't you wish for her to be healthy?" Jack tensed beside and Will braced himself. This wouldn't be easy.

A few minutes later, both men had made quick work of the demon and Laurence. Neither of them felt especially good about it, but at least justice was done.

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Alana had been dreading this. It had been two weeks since she learned that Nicholas Boyle's corpse had been found and every day she found herself waiting for Jack Crawford to arrive and drag them off. She'd have to watch has a sensitive young woman would be forced to face the dead body of a man that attacked her and presumably murdered her friend. Two weeks to the day, Jack Crawford summoned she and Abigail to the Halamshiral barracks.

Abigail was staring wide-eyed at everything around them, and Alana longed to comfort her. They finally told her the news and told her to act like they hadn't, not wanting Jack to have a reason to believe that she could fake anything. It wasn't what she would have preferred to do, which was not bring her here at all, but it was better than nothing. The girl could prepare herself.

Not that it ultimately helped much. They had been brought into a room that held nothing but Jack Crawford and a table with a sheet over what was clearly a body. Abigail shuddered by her and stepped in before either Hannibal or Alana. Time for damage control.

Jack, without much ceremony, quickly uncovered the body. A sharp breath came from Abigail, who was staring at the body. She couldn't seem to look away. Nicholas Boyle was pale, even for a corpse. His body had already begun its cycle of decomposition, even with preservation glyphs being consistently placed upon it. It had bloated up in spots, discoloration mottling the body. Part of the skin had caved in on the limbs and the insides were lined with maggots eagerly enjoying the flesh now that the magic had worn off. The gaping hole in his abdomen was filled with them. Protection from scavengers had been a top priority, but even then there were tears and rips that looked like the rats had gotten to him.

"Mademoiselle Hobbs, is this the same one that attacked you, Lady Bloom, and Comte Lecter in your home?"

Alana was worried when Abigail didn't respond at first, still staring at the body. Then she sharply looked away. "That's him."

Jack was examining her, like his Seekers would a corpse or a scene. It was like he thought he could peel back her face with the force of his gaze and pull out her secrets. "I have a few questions I would like you to answer."

Abigail glanced at the both of them for guidance and Alana tried her best to convey support. She, Hannibal, and Will were her guardians and they would protect her to the best of their

ability, even from this. If Jack came for Abigail with anything less than absolute evidence, she would fight him for her. Abigail nodded.

Jack got right down to business. “Have you seen this man since the night of the attack?”

Abigail looked up and held his gaze. It just barely managed not to seem like a challenge. “Could you cover him up please?”

Jack was unmoved. “I need you to answer the question.”

This was ridiculous; Abigail had already seen him and shouldn’t be forced to spend her time with that in the open during this ‘discussion’, this interrogation. Alana reached over in front of her, aiming to cover the body. Jack intercepted her hand without looking at her, eyes remaining on Abigail. Alana glared at the man, frustrated.

Abigail’s eyes were shining and Alana promised herself that she would give the girl room to let out her emotions later. Here, she couldn’t afford to. Voice flat, Abigail replied, “No. I haven’t seen him since he attacked me.”

Then Jack did something that Alana especially didn’t approve of. “Nicholas Boyle was gutted with what seems to be a hunting knife. Your father taught you how to hunt, I’ve been told. You knew how to do that, right?”

“Jack!” Alana exclaimed. Retreating, she aimed to usher Abigail gently out and get her away from this farce. “I do not approve of this.”

Jack never looked away from Abigail as he said, “Then leave. You were only here by invitation and courtesy, Lady Bloom. Please do not interrupt again.”

Abigail was vibrating. “You think **I** did this?”

“Where did you go when you left the Chantry?”

The indignant vibrating increased. “Sometimes I would hide my face and go about the town, sometimes I would go in the woods to hide. I would just leave to get away from it all. The Chantry was suffocating and I needed to breathe.”

“Did you ever meet Nicholas Boyle? DId he know you or your father from before?”

“No for the former and, as for the latter, not that I’m aware of.” A very political response. If she wasn’t so angry, Alana would have taken the time to be proud. Apparently, their lessons were sticking.

“You know nothing about his death?” Jack demanded.

“He tried to kill me. That’s all I know. He didn’t, and I’m still here. I’m going to take solace in that. Lady Bloom and Comte Lecter saved my life and from him.”

“You haven’t seen this man since?”

Abigail quieted and glanced at the body before looking back up at Jack. She gave a sad and fake smile before whispering wetly, “Only in my nightmares.”

This was it. Alana had enough and pulled Abigail away from Jack. As they left, Jack asked her, “Do you believe her?”

She pushed Abigail out of the room and to the waiting Hannibal that had remained outside of the room with the body. “I believe her. She may be keeping something back, but I doubt it’s the murder of Nicholas Boyle.”

“You doubt it is?” he said, catching her phrasing.

“If it is true, Jack, I’m sure it was in self-defense.”

“Then why hide it?”

That Alana pause, despite the fact that she had an answer prepared, “Jack. Why hide it?” She turned to him. “Because if she didn’t, she’d face a far worse reaction than this. At least, that’s what she would think.”

“If she hid it, it made it worse,” Jack replied. “There’s no way she’d be able to claim self-defense now.”

Alana scoffed, “Why are we even talking about this? She didn’t. End of discussion.” A quick turn on heel and she was out the door. “Goodbye Jack.”

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They had specifically left him out of the room when the Seekers brought Abigail in for question in regards to the death of Nicholas Boyle. Will hadn’t even known the cadaver was here until after Abigail, Alana, and Hannibal had left. Storming in on Jack Crawford and angrily venting about the situation did nothing, which left Will by himself to think.

He needed to understand Nicholas Boyle’s death, for Abigail’s sake. If nothing else, so that he could assure her and Jack.

It was late in the afternoon, nearly evening, so the candles were still low. No need for a large amount of unnatural light. Boyle’s body had been moved from the main room to storage, so Will needed to pick the lock. The room was largely empty, boxes full of strange things and shelves full of of the inane, but case-relevant artifacts. The corpse that he was looking for was sitting pretty on one such shelf, a dirty and blood-stained sheet draped over it.

Will knew that he needed to see the body and to get closure. He had spent so long trying to get in the head of the man that murdered Marissa Schurr and Cassandra Boyle; maybe understanding his death would not only help him and Abigail, but also aid his sleeping at night. Maybe this would be what the Creators were willing him to see and the visions would leave him be. The raven-feathered halla hadn’t started appearing until after the death of those girls; with their killer gone, he might even be free, he and Abigail.

The elf pulled back the sheet to reveal the corpse. Two doll eyes stared up at him and he had to prevent the urge to poke at them and make sure they were real. So devoid of life. Between the eyes and the waxy sheen of the skin, Nicholas almost seemed like he wasn't a real person. Was this the punishment of those that became monsters? Was their personhood taken from them in death?

Would that be what happened to him?

Will stood in front of it and sighed, trying desperately to untense his body. In. Out. He took out his pouch of herbs, now almost nearly out, and washed a pinch down with water. He couldn't afford to be out long, what with him not actually having permission to be there and all.

He remained in the same room, but Nicholas Boyle sat up and gazed at him with those toy eyes. The movement was smooth and practiced for a corpse. The body turned and its feet touched the ground, suddenly clothed and looking much more alive. He reached forward and ***slammed*** *Will against the wall, face in completely agony. Will looked down and see the knife in his hand slide in and up, tearing flesh like paper.*

A blink and then absolute pain flared up his spine. The knife was no longer in his hand, but now in his abdomen, being held by another. Will looked up and saw…

Abigail. She was breathing hard, staring back at him in absolute horror. She jerked and the flare went up through his body, coupled with the betrayal of everything that Will thought he knew.

Immediately after Will woke, he left the barracks. He couldn't be there after what he just discovered; he needed time to think. There had to be more to this. Abigail couldn't have killed someone! For about an hour, he wandered around the Alienage, too keyed up to do anything but brood. When his reasoning started to become suspiciously circular and look more and more like denial, Will did what his gut had been telling him.

He went to go speak with Hannibal.

The guards let him in; they still watched him warily, but by now they probably were used to and even expecting his presence. Vaguely it occurred to him that he was fueling the rumors that they were lovers or that Hannibal had been consorting with Dalish magic for power. He almost didn't walk in, suddenly concerned that he was affecting his sponsor's reputation. Almost. The reason for his visit pressed him onward, nudging his thoughts every time he got too close to turning around.

His entrance into the Lecter suite was rather understated. Hannibal greeted him and Will retreated to the farthest window in the room to look out at Halamshiral. This was the life that Abigail had been building up to, the life that she had been given despite what her father did to her. If he told Jack, this would go away. Was his sense of justice worth her freedom and future?

That didn't mean he could keep it in any longer. "Abigail killed Nicholas Boyle."

“I know.”

Will did a double-take. That wasn’t what he was expecting Hannibal to say. Of all the things: he knew? Will expected fear, denial, resentment, concern, or pretty much anything else. Instead, Hannibal, even with his face impassive, seemed resigned. “Tell me why,” Will said, enunciating every word clearly while they tried to stay in his mouth.

“I helped her dispose of the body.” A gut punch if he had ever knew one. Helped her dispose of the body?

“Not very well, apparently,” Will said. It was discovered, after all. If it had been better disposed of, this conversation would never have happened. Abigail would eventually be able to escape this mess and live her own life, free of Garrett Hobbs and the Seekers of Truth. If it was never found, Will wouldn’t have to live knowing that the girl he saved had killed someone, like he had killed someone, like Hannibal had killed someone. Abigail would remain untainted.

“Have you told Seeker Crawford?” Hannibal asked, voice stagnant. Will didn’t know what to make of his approach. It was so dead and flat that he didn’t know whether to consider it carefully or not.

Will decided to be honest with Hannibal and himself. “No. I wanted it to not be true. I hoped that it wasn’t real.”

“It was.” Hannibal stepped closer. “It is. There is nothing that can be done now. You know the truth.”

“Do I?” he asked, voice thick. They had already lied to him. Even if he hadn’t wanted to know, they hadn’t trusted him with this. He was outside of their lives, alone.

Hannibal spoke quickly, “Everything else you know about that night is true. Nicholas Boyle attacked us and Abigail defended herself. The only fabrication was the end.”

“Why?” he demanded. He didn’t need to and it must have shown on his face.

“You know why. This would be all the fuel needed to start the pyre to burn her. Garrett Hobbs is dead, but the masses call for blood and justice. Seekers of Truth though they are, they would all see this done for the sake of peace.” Another step. “She is no more a killer than you are for what happened with her father or I am for the death of Lord Budge.”

That was funny. He often felt like a killer. Still, Will conceded the point. “Does Alana know?”

“No. She was the first one Nicholas attacked and was not awake for any of it. I thought the fewer that knew, the better. Less people to be punished and potentially let loose the conspiracy.”

Will sighed and held his ground as Hannibal took another step, despite every muscle in his body screaming to retreat. He turned his downcast gaze slightly to face Hannibal,

maintaining eye contact with his chin. “I feel so lost. I’m no arbiter and it’s not my place to decide. It’s not ours.”

“And some uncaring judge is? They do not know her or understand her! We are her fathers, we know the truth of the matter more than some false court. We need to take care of her, guide her down the right path.”

His Lordship was only a couple of feet away. “We need to serve her better than Garrett Hobbs. If you go to Jack, you murder her future. We must tell no one.” He punctuated the last five words, but Will didn’t need it. His decision was already made, shown by the vague nod he gave with no real awareness by it.

He must tell no one.

Hannibal closed the distance and gently established contact. “We’re doing the right thing, Will. For Abigail.”

It was for Abigail that he agreed to dine alongside the Red Tattler later that night. Following his conversation with Hannibal, the noble laid out what had been happening in the household ever since Nicholas Boyle’s body was discovered, especially the reasoning Abigail had behind inviting the bard to dinner. Will still adamantly disagreed with her notion to write a book, but there was little that he could do to change her mind. As she reminded him, his involvement in her life as of late had been rather sparse. He didn’t really have the authority to tell her no on the matter nor was it his place. This was Abigail’s decision and hers alone. What he could do was show her support and not abandon ship.

So, they gathered for dinner. Freddie was across from him (unfortunately) with Abigail to his left. Alana had the infinitely worse position of being seated directly beside the ginger. They sat awkwardly while Hannibal was fixing food for the bard in the other room. It was rather uncouth, but Lounds showed up and exclaimed that she did not eat meat (a diet becoming more popular among certain groups of the nobility). It would reflect poorly on Hannibal if he did not acquiesce to her preferences, despite the rudeness of her behavior. The ginger could always cite that Hannibal should have done his research, but it was terrible, nonetheless.

Hannibal returned and placed a new plate in front of her. All of them were stock still until Freddie began eating, despite it being customary for the host or the guest of honor to have the first bite, neither of which were Freddie.

“This is delicious, your Lordship,” she complimented, although the address sounded spat out. The rest of them tucked in, Abigail keeping her head down and deigning not to look up at anyone. Will had to fight several different urges, the two most prominent being to protect and to glare. “I will say that the sheer amount of meat in the dish is a shame, but it most certainly looks delicious.”

“Well, appearances are everything,” Will snarked. He saw Alana level him a look trying to tell him to behave.

“They truly are Monsieur Will,” Freddie said while nodding sagely. He kind of wanted to punch her and her arrogant face. “Perception is our reality. If something is perceived to be

real, does anything else matter?" He threw up a little in his mouth. "Hidden things don't exist."

"I don't have anything to hide," declared Abigail, but Will knew that she did. Nicholas Boyle was something to hide now. It wouldn't have been earlier, but if she came out with it now, people would be crying murderer before she could say anything else.

Freddie rolled her eyes. "Everybody has something to hide, especially in the Grand Game. If you don't have something now, you will have it sooner rather than later. What a bard's job is, is to serve the noble of their choice and work to accomplish their goals." She leaned forward, taking another bite of her salad. "I've never aligned myself with a specific noble before and no one will expect me to be doing your bidding. There are a lot of ways to be a bard and coming in loud so that everyone ignores your actual goals is one of them. By letting me tell your story, I am your bard." Another bite.

"You must understand our concerns," Alana said. "What we want to do is prepare and protect Abigail. She is about to take a big step and it is important that we accomplish our goals."

The Tattler nodded, "With everything that happened with her father, she's already coming in at a disadvantage. The rest of the court has dirt on her and will perceive themselves as superior than her, encouraging others to do so as well."

"Insinuation," muttered Will. Freddie smirked.

"The fact that she hasn't said anything until now gave the rumor mill the time to do their work. Plenty of people have already decided her guilt, or at least a version of it," she continued. Will saw Abigail slightly sink into her chair. "My help will allow her to have a future."

"That's what we want," insisted Alana. It hurt to watch her here and keep their secret from her. Will was happy that she hadn't lied to him, but now he was lying to her. Now wouldn't be the time or place, but maybe he could do something later. Surely, Hannibal wouldn't have a problem with her knowing with the position she is currently putting herself in.

"We all want what's best for Abigail," Hannibal concluded. Will nodded his agreement, still a little too brusque to actually speak to the nuisance.

"We aren't so different after all," Freddie said as she popped a vegetable in her mouth.

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Freddie was gone. Will had left, too, gone very quickly after the red-head exited. This left Abigail and Hannibal relaxing in the study after the meal, the servants were busy cleaning the mess in the other room. For a minute, she had started to go join them, but it quickly became apparent that her guardian was not going to allow her to. So, they relaxed. Or, well, Hannibal relaxed. Abigail tried to as something about the meal had been on her mind all night.

The defensiveness, the way that he had looked at her during the meal; both of them led her to draw her conclusion and she didn't like it one bit. If she had a choice between which of them

would have found out, Alana or Will, Abigail would've picked Alana every time. She was teaching her to survive the court, Alana wouldn't have been happy, maybe even angry, but her disappointment wouldn't cause the same sinking that Will's did. He had thought her better than she was and Abigail had enjoyed that. It was gone now.

Exhaling sharply through her nose, Abigail stood and walked over to Hannibal. A deep breath in, then: "Will knows, doesn't he?"

He nodded and tilted his head to the side, "He knows about Nicholas Boyle."

Her breath caught and heat prickled behind her eyes. "What- what am I going to do?" Her voice sounded wetter than she thought it should. Abigail had so badly wanted Nicholas Boyle to be found. He was found. It was inevitable that Will would learn the truth about it. She got what she wanted.

Her guardian laid a hand on her shoulder; it was gentle and light, a touch more than anything else. "He won't tell anyone."

"You don't know that!" That was only part of the problem anyways.

"He won't, because if he does than the one good thing in his life is tainted." Wasn't it already? She **saw** the way he looked at her. "He will lie to Jack Crawford about you just as he was lying to himself."

A shudder made its way through and up her spine as the heat behind her eyes transformed into water. She was crying.

"You're safe here, Abigail. Will and I will protect you. Alana and Nesiraya will continue to teach you. And no one will the truth. The lie that you keep telling yourself will stay hidden."

She leaned, nearly collapsing, into the wall. Tears were staining her face and made her skin sticky. She could taste them in her mouth. "I helped him," she whispered, barely a breath from raw lips.

"I can't hear you," Hannibal said, demanding more than requesting.

She sobbed. "I helped him." Finally, the tears poured, and they wouldn't stop no matter how hard she tried to catch her breath and calm herself. She had helped her father. All this time she had been working towards denying all of their claims and defending herself, but it was just based on more lies. Abigail was as terrible as he was.

"I knew what he was." What would her mother say? "I knew what he did. I knew." What did she think? "I was the one that met them, talked to them. Laughed and joked with them. I would ask them where they lived, what they were doing, where they were going, when they'd be alone. Girls that looked like me." Did she guess? "They could've been my friends." Did it matter? She's dead, just like the rest of them.

Abigail looked up at him, the only one so far that hadn't judged her and had been protecting her almost from the start. "I couldn't tell him no. I knew that it was them or me."

The touch on her shoulder curled around it and pulled her away from the wall and towards him. For a split second, she assumed the worst and was ready to just let it happen. He just held her. Hannibal just held her in his arms and gently stroked her hair. “I wondered when you were going to tell me.” He had known.

“How long have you-”

“I always suspected. From the beginning, I believed it might have been the case. Your father didn’t appear to be the persuasive or trustworthy individual. He needed someone just as charming as he was not to accomplish this kind of thing.”

She smiled slightly, but the horror remained. It was a fragile bitter thing, gone as briefly as it became. “I’m a monster.”

He shook his head, hand continuously stroking her hair. It was strangely soothing. After so long with all touch being motivated, this felt devoid of it. Logically, she knew that this still had something behind it, even if it was something as benign as wanting to comfort, but it felt clinical. For that reason, she didn’t pull away.

“I know what monsters are, Abigail, and you are not one. You’re a victim of your father’s machinations and circumstance.” It felt so simple in a way that it truly wasn’t when he said it like that.

“Will Graham and I, we’re going to protect you.”

They were going to protect her? They didn’t know what she had done. Abigail remembered…

She remembered going from apprenticeship to apprenticeship trying to find one that fit her. That’s at least what her father said. Her mother always told her that she could do whatever she wanted in this world, her father always said that what they offered was never good enough for his daughter. It was only later that she understood that he was making up excuses. Always, he made the refusal sound like it was her idea, her choice. Eventually, the young woman realized that he was eyeing every other girl that was trying to take the jobs.

She should have listened to her mother and stopped letting her father tell her what to do. Maybe her mother would still be alive and her world wouldn’t have fallen apart. Or maybe, Abigail would be dead with them and none of this would matter anyway. So often, she worked to make people see her as something more than a victim, but now that Will knew she killed Nicholas and Hannibal knew she had helped her father she almost wished for it. The elf had just barely managed to keep his disappointment under wraps and could barely look at her. It hurt so badly

She remembered…

Going to an apprenticeship and walking along the street. Suddenly, her father dropped behind her and put a deceptively gentle hand on her shoulder. By this point, Abigail understood what was happening. Forward, she gazed and it landed on a girl that looked just like her. She was

tending a few horses, utterly alone, but at peace. Abigail looked back, hoping her father wasn't asking what she thought he was, but he simply smiled and said, "Go on."

The young woman breathed and accompanied her look-alike. "Mind if I join you?"

The other startled, "You like horses, too?"

Abigail nodded, not trusting her voice to remain steady. She tried to remind herself, this girl for me. It felt hollower each time. "Do you mind if I sit?"

"Go ahead," the girl replied and Abigail pooled up a stool to join her. Together, they sat and brushed the horse, allowing the steady breathing of the animals to create a rhythm to their silence.

"I love travelling by horse, but I rarely like to do it alone," Abigail said, hoping to start a conversation. Maybe they could ride horses together and leave. They could get away from her father, she could rescue her mother, and no one else would get hurt.

"I love the freedom of horseback riding. No one telling you what to do or where to go," the other girl replied. "The possibilities are endless, even if only for a brief moment."

The Hobbs girl smiled, "I'm Abigail."

The other, "Elise."

They chatted for a few more moments, but Abigail was keenly aware of her father's gaze the entire time.

Perhaps she could have said something then. They were in a public place; in retrospect, she knew that his ability to do anything would have been severely limited. Maybe she could have taken Elise, grabben a horse, and gone somewhere else. Anywhere else.

It didn't matter now. We cannot change what was, only act on what is.

Her mother was dead. Her father was dead. Those girls are dead. Nicholas Boyle is dead, and everyone knows that dead don't return.

What good is grief? The only mourning that should be done is for the living.

The next day, Abigail still felt terrible. Her eyes were too dry from all the crying she had done and she felt extremely dehydrated, enough that it was starting to give her a headache. Nesiraya seemed to know what had happened (of course) and told her that she could have the day off to prepare for tomorrow. After being asked, her teacher reminded her that tonight was the debutante ball. She had… she had forgotten.

In all of the hustle of the world around, Abigail had forgotten something she had been looking forward to for weeks. She had spent so much time worrying about Nicholas Boyle through her dress fitting, the etiquette lessons, and the weird rehearsal night (which made her aware just how much taller than her Comte Lecter was).

The fact that it was tonight was terrifying. All of this going on around her and tonight she would be required to put on a metaphorical and literal mask to keep herself in check. At least they wouldn't be able to totally see her face, so if she needed to she could hide. The stress of everything was almost too much, so she did what she saw her mother do on occasions such as this. She took a bath.

Nesiraya was only too happy to get her help moving the hot water, and the young woman was willing to admit that helping Nesiraya allowed her mind to wander and being putting every emotion in neat boxes. Alana had told her it was called compartmentalizing. It helped, keeping everything set aside for later. Once she had it, the bath was heavenly. The hot water took away the grimy feeling on her skin and eased the tension in her body. Washing her face scoured the stickiness from it and left a feeling of open freshness behind.

Eventually the water started to cool, so she removed herself and got into some light daywear that would be easy to slip a dress over. It wasn't much, but Comte Lecter wasn't going to be in the suite today. He was speaking to the Empress about her duties tonight. Exciting.

Alana, however, was still there. Furthermore, she was sitting in her own daywear in the main room of the suite and appeared to be waiting for her. She held a small package in her hand, a box barely the size of a small book. When Abigail entered, she looked up and gestured for her to come over.

She nearly tiptoed, her feet light and delicate. Quick steps and she was by Alana. "Sit down!" Alana said playfully and tugged her on the settee beside her. Abigail followed suite, still a little uncomfortable with the way this conversation seemed to be going. With tonight coming and all that had been happening lately, Abigail just wanted to hole up in her room to prepare for all of the interaction she'd be forced to engage in later. It seemed that, at least at this moment, Alana had other ideas.

The older woman adjusted her posture on the seat and sat up beside her. They were face to face, Alana clutching at the box as if it were something precious. "Seeing as tonight is your debut, there is something I wanted to give you. I know I'm not your mother, but mine was the one that gave this to me during my debut." She held out the box to Abigail. Abigail took it from her and gently opened it.

A mask made of bleached bone sat in a blue velvet setting. Small designs were etched with ink into the wings, practically dripping down it. She gently moved it to her face, intrigued as it covered the top of her entire nose and down until it settled under the cheekbones. The inside of the mask was lined with soft cloth, smooth and comfortably cool. Small lines of sapphires extended in lines on the forehead, shaping what might otherwise have been boring to look at. Through the holes, Abigail peered out at Alana, a smile spreading to her cheeks.

Despite the frustration of the next few hours, the smile stayed. She had to fight to keep it at times, but then she was reminded of the mask and the simple exchange she had with Alana and it returned. Through the dress, the bodies, the hair, the shoes, the walking, through all of it, she enjoyed the soft feeling against her skin. Nesiraya had side-eyed her continued wearing of it and made her take if off. The elf claimed that if she sweated in it now, she would regret wearing it later. She also warned Abigail that the design of the mask was a challenge. Then, she told Abigail the implications of Alana giving her that mask.

It was daunting and thrilling. An immense surge of self-worth that she hadn't been expecting and hadn't known that she needed. Despite the fact that it did hide her face overall and her hair would be hidden, her mouth was visible to every person, and thus her expression. Reactions were always being carefully studied by players, which is why many wore masks that completely covered their faces. The risk of wearing this was an enormous one. Potential weakness could be being broadcast on her face, but if she could pull it off, Abigail would gain immediate respect of many seasoned players of the Game. Someone so young being able to carefully control their presentation would give her some legitimacy she wouldn't have otherwise. Apparently, Alana believed that she could handle the challenge.

The dress was ridiculous though. It put a good deal of pressure on her posture (which had her thanking Alana and Nesiraya for all of their lessons), because the thing felt like it was going to tip over with how heavy the skirt was. What didn't help was how low the actual rack poofing it out hung, making the balance terrible. Abigail asked her mentors if she could wear pants and was told no. This was her debut, afterwards she could engage in more daring fashion. Her hair was braided and made to circle the back of her head before having a covering for her hair placed on it, the color complementing the deep blue of the dress.

After she was finished being made up and prepared, Abigail went to join the other prospects in the hall. They listened as all of the regulars were announced before they were being called in.

Her entire being was a bunch of jumbled up nerves, but she kept her concentration on schooling her face. Hopefully, it would eventually become instinct. She almost didn't notice when her name was being called.

"Presenting the young Lady Abigail Lecter, formerly Hobbs, of Red Crossing."

She stepped out from the annex and into the main ballroom, greeting the many nobles of Halamshiral and beyond for the very first time.

Lethanavir

Chapter Summary

A few character have to adjust to their realities. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Chapter Notes

08/31/24: Not yet edited

Back from the holidays! Hope you guys like this chapter! This was the episode that made me love the show so I hope I do it justice. I basically worked through this episode and what I wanted from it (via outline) before I even started posting the chapters of this story. It's not what originally inspired me to do this AU; that would actually be Francis Dolarhyde (for Dragon Age no kidding).

Lethanavir: Kin to the Dead

The debut had apparently gone very well for Abigail, and Will was happy for her. Still, he was ashamed to say that he had been hesitant around her after the night he learned about Nicholas Boyle. The ragged feeling of betrayal and hurt never left him, as irrational as it was, tearing his nerves raw. She was supposed to be an innocent; she was supposed to be free. The rest of him knew that it was unfair to put such hopes on the girl, especially considering she had officially entered a life that would guarantee a boundary cross or two at some point. Sometimes the rational part didn't matter. A sliver of hope died the moment he approached Hannibal and had his worst fears confirmed.

It was the week after the debut when he spoke to Hannibal next. He approached Abigail briefly to give her congratulations and listen to her explain how her night went in detail, but gave very little in response. Will felt guilty for his limited amount of engagement, but his energy was stifled and his caseload lately had been increasing. They were largely simple things of course, easy cases to solve, but it was grating to night-after-night go into the head of murderers.

His sleeping had taken a sharp drop in amount; he was waking up periodically throughout the night, and it was taking longer and longer for him to go back into the world of dreams. Demons lurked in his nightmares, but they never did more than that. The lack of interaction

had begun to feel almost worse than when they did speak with him; this sense of dread permeated his being, leaking out of his pores alongside his night-sweat. He was trapped prey waiting for the predators to move.

“I am acutely aware of the pounding of my heart. It reverberates so much that I can feel it in my throat,” Will said, slumping in one of Hannibal’s plush chairs, wishing for it to swallow him whole. “Abigail took a life. A simple flick of the wrist and Nicholas Boyle was finished. Any potential he may have had cut short.”

“You focus on her kill, are you ignoring your own?” Hannibal retorted, comfortably seated behind the desk, but thee chair turned perpendicular so that he could face Will. Somehow, his body language was still straight, yet comfortable. It was almost as if the desk was still in front of him.

“What about yours?” Will asked, admittedly more to hurt than anything else. He felt slightly bad about it, but only slightly. Hannibal was poking at his exposed insides, trying to see what flinched.

Hannibal only nodded. “I understand. Will, you’re grieving. Life has been denied to you and to Abigail. There was hope for a while, hope that if Abigail could have started over, leaving behind the madness and horror of her father, so could you.” Here, Will did flinch, but Hannibal continued. “You could untangle yourself from the web of murder that’s surrounded you for the last several months and finally be clear.”

“I have never been clear.” From the moment that his magic manifested, he has been plagued by demons and, even before that, uncertainty.

“And the possibility of clarity is being denied to you. It slips away, and you worry it will forever be beyond your reach, blocked by eternal fog and mist.” That sounded about right. All good things did tend to slip away, sliding out of his grip as he tried to grasp them.

The truth had died, or at least what he had thought the truth was had. Instead, he was left with this unfortunate new truth, one that consisted of things that could never be taken back. “We lied for her.”

“For Abigail. For our daughter. As you said, we’ve both taken lives, people who die when we have no choice, and at that moment they are not flesh, but light and air and color.”

“Isn’t that what it is to be alive?” Will asked, nearly pleading.

Hannibal tilted his head, eyes suddenly looking beady and inhuman. “Do you feel alive, Will?”

There was a question. Did he feel alive? Probably not. Ever since Gideon, probably before that with Buddish, it felt like the world was moving too fast for him and he was perpetually being left behind. Fear was starting to take over as his world became less tangible. He was never safe in his dreams, but now he wasn’t in his own head whilst awake. Alana said he was good, once, and maybe he was. Here he was, slipping away. “I feel like I’m fading.”

“Have you lost any more time? Have you had any more visions?”

He nodded reluctantly, but truthfully. In the last week, he had lost time no less than six times, possibly more. There were a couple times he didn’t count, because it felt more like he had simply lost concentration. It was so anxiety-inducing that Will had begun withdrawing. Beverly and Alana had noticed and been trying to talk to him about whatever was happening, but he made sure not to be in a room with them too long. When he wasn’t required to be at work, he wasn’t. Instead, he holed up in his house with his dogs, hoping that he wouldn’t hurt anyone or end up where he shouldn’t.

“Will, as often as you can, I would like you to think of where you are and when. Try and be grounded in the present moment, the now.”

Will smiled, but it was bitter. “That isn’t always an option for me.”

Hannibal smiled, and it was genuine. “That’s why I said as often as you can.”

Will nodded and breathed slowly through his nose. In. Out. He did it again to feel the muscles in his shoulders and upper back untense on the exhale, his body trying to unwind from the knot keeping the tangle together. “It is evening. I am in Halamshiral, specifically the Winter Palace. My name is Will.”

“A simple reminder. A handle to reality for you to hold on, and to know that you are alive as the rest of us perceive you to be.”

Perception was a funny thing. It could lie to you.

The next day, Will decided to go hunting. It had been a while, honestly, and he was definitely not the best at it, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t try. It had taken him a couple of hours to get out of the city and find essentially what counted as a forest (very very loosely). He immersed himself in nature, enjoying the connection with the world far from the city. With no one around for him to be bothered by or to hurt, Will almost felt at peace. The small part of him that wasn’t was anticipatory, following his prey through the underbrush. He thought he saw a deer about half an hour ago and he wasn’t going to let it go.

Prior, he had fixed his bow up to be a little less ceremonial and more practical. Some of his arrows were perfectly fletched and balanced, which he was happy about. He already had a couple of rabbits on his belt. The deer he had marked poked its head up out of the brush and glanced around. It hadn’t noticed him yet, just a routine checking for danger. He drew the bow after taking a deep breath and used it to relax and hold steady his hands. He waited for a clean kill, arm muscles straining, not wanting her to suffer. Her chest was suddenly exposed and he finally released the arrow. It shot straight and true.

Quickly he approached, making sure that the animal was dead. She was. A quick thanks was sent to Andruil for the bounty and the ability to make a clean kill, then he started to dress her. A insert in the stomach, trying to pull the knife through without damaging the organs. Blood gushed out onto his hand; he had forgotten how messy it could be. For a moment, all seemed normal, but she just kept bleeding. Soon the forest floor and his trousers were soaked with it

and it kept running, actually filling the small dip that he was in. It was running up his arms and he could almost taste it.

He looked back down and the deer was a girl on the floor of a room. The four walls around him were encasing him in the space, a bed behind him pushing cruely on his senses. He was sitting over her, watching her cry and blood gushed from her mouth. Her eyes were begging him to stop, but it was already finished. The knife was in his hand, already stained. He.. had he killed her? A hand grabbed onto his leg and he practically leapt to his feet. One slipped on some of the blood as he tried to leave the room, actually soaking his pants this time. Frantic, he ran for the door, trying to leave the rapidly cooling corpse.

On the other side stood the squad of Seekers that he had been working with. Beverly, Brian, Jimmy, and Jack all turned to him, a little quickly because they could hear his breathing. Once they turned, every single one had a look of shock on their faces.

“Will?” asked Beverly, concern shining through. Jack was staring at him and Will couldn’t decipher his look. He tried deep breaths, but they kept coming short and quick. A knife was in his hand and blood was coating his arms. He could feel the tackiness against his skin and knew, despite everything that just happened, this was definitely real.

There was still a full and clean wash basin in the small little house. The girl from his vision, Beth Le’Beau, lived in a tiny two-story on the outskirts of the Halamshiral market, almost closer to the Alienage than the actual Lower District of the city, where she managed in relative privacy. The house was affordable for a lone young woman, because it doubled as a small bakery. It was popular enough that nobles actually came consistently, despite the undesirability of the location, one of which was the one that reported her murder.

Will, desperately seizing the fact that the wash basin was still there, was currently trying to scrub the blood of his hands. The whole thing was quickly being dyed red and brown, but that didn’t stop him from trying to use every last drop of clean water. His trousers were ruined, which meant he would have to wear leggings for a little while until he could get a new pair.

Jack was staring at him, of which he was acutely aware. It burned a hole through the shirt on his back, not accusingly, but definitely worried. Will looked outside to the farmland a little further beyond, anything to make it look like he was occupied and definitely not avoiding talking to Jack. Eventually, the water was only adding the blood back on his hands, and they were as good as they were going to get. He dried them off on the nearby rag. It was a light blue and freshly cleaned, now stained reddish-brown. Tarnished. He could relate.

“I’m going to ask you a question,” stated Jack, preparing Will for the oncoming onslaught. “If, for a single moment, I think you are withholding anything from me, I cannot guarantee the response you want.” The larger man paused to let that sink in. There were a thousand responses that Will did not want, so the man might as well spin the wheel. Continuing this line of questioning was one of the unpleasant ones.

“Will, what happened in there?” Jack asked, so softly compared to his normal speaking tone. It implored him to answer honestly, but he didn’t know if he could. What it could mean if he was truthful… It hurt too much to think about. Buddish had been crossing his mind for a

moment, but he dismissed it. The mess that just happened convinced him that there wasn't any possession involved, but if he talked about it to Jack, that is what it would look like.

"I got confused," Will tried, testing the words out as they erupted.

Jack shook his head. "I've seen you confused, I've seen you upset. This was pure fear, nearly terror. I've never seen you that afraid before."

Quickly, Will tried to dismiss it, "I'm used to fear. I've managed it all my life, but I simply wasn't able to manage it for this one moment. I wasn't as fortified as normal and overwhelmed by what the spirits were telling me, but I'm better prepared this time. It won't happen again. I can go back in!"

"No Will!" Jack moved to stand in between him and the door. "I saw your face when you walked out of that room. It left you completely stunned, silent as a grave."

Creators no! He needed to get Jack off this line of questioning before the answers became dangerous for him. "I can see and hear better afraid. The words don't just come out the same way."

"You touched the weapon," Jack said, enunciating every word. He slowly continued, "You left that room covered in the victim's blood."

The team leader wasn't going to budge. Will saw in Jack's eyes that the man was going to pull him away without anything concrete. There would be questions, things done 'for his own good'. If Jack actually thought a demon was involved, if he thought that Will was any danger to anyone, he would have to take him into custody. It didn't really matter whether or not it was true. Will understood his reasoning, but the last thing he wanted to do was live out the rest of his days in a Chantry prison disguised as a school for magic

He settled for sounding honest, even if the actual situation was far more complicated. "I-I thought I was responsible for it. The spirit tried to get a little too close." Jack's face closed, so Will rushed to salvage his words. "I managed to fight it off, but the adrenaline pushed me out and I wasn't able to finish reconstructing the scene."

The eyebrows of the broader man, the human, furrowed and his concern came as a different flavor. "You were worried about telling me that?" he asked. Will wasn't worried about telling him that specifically, because it was a lie, but Will remained silent. "Has this been happening a lot lately? Is that why you were so strange after Laurence. Beverly told me there was a demon, were you asking if you seemed okay because you were worried it had gotten to you?"

Will nodded, because what else was he going to do?

"Will, this work is difficult and you are more vulnerable than anyone here. I think the work is good for you and gives you a sense of stability and purpose. That being said, if you need a break, you need to tell me. Of all the people here, I am officially the most concerned for you."

“I thought we were trying to stay away from ‘officially’,” Will pointed out and Jack rolled his eyes.

“You know what I mean.”

Indignation rose up. “What you mean is that if the concern graduates from unofficial to official then I can’t be your bloodhound any more.”

Jack glared. It wasn’t really a glare, but it managed to straddle a line between that and a look of resignation and disbelief. “I’m only trying to be careful with you. I get it.. You don’t want to be the cause for concern, but you will be regardless and I need to know that I’m not breaking you.” The human sighed and stood a little taller, but took a step back. The Seeker was trying to right himself, but not push into Will’s space, which he knew that he would appreciate later. Right now, a steady stream of anxiety and frustration was building. He did not want to have this conversation, not with Jack, not with anybody. “Have I broken you?” Jack asked.

He decided to answer with a deflection. “Does it matter? I’m the only one who can do this shit.”

The man clicked his mouth shut before replying, “Fear makes you rude, Will.” Then he turned out of the alcove and rejoined the rest of the team.

Will remained behind for the moment, trying to take deep breaths. Jack had walked away before he said anything especially damning, but that didn’t make it any easier to control after this. In the back of his head, Will understood that all of Jack’s concerns were normal and his actions were the best he could do without violating Will’s autonomy. Still, if he decided to take matters into his own hands to ensure Will’s ‘safety’, then he could end up in chains, dead, or worse.

Will took some of the powdered herb mix for headaches and joined the group as well, knowing that they were probably waiting on him. Everyone was inside the room from earlier, Brian and Beverly hovering over the body while Jimmy was picking up the knife from where Will had dropped it. Jack stood in the corner, directing behavior.

When Will entered, all four of them looked in his direction. They shifted around for a moment, nobody feeling comfortable enough to interject their own opinion. He shuffled off to the side and did his best to avoid their stares.

One by one, they went back and did their own thing. Jack turned to the group, “What happened?”

Brian looked back at Jack, his eyes darting back to Will every now and then. “She drowned in her own blood.”

“What she didn’t drown in is all over the room.” He paused, then said, “Or own Will.” Beverly chuckled lightly and Will tried to smile for the gentle tease. He was positive it came across as insincere.

“He was waiting for her. Dragged her under the bed,” Will said. Beverly’s smile fell. Brian shuffled away slightly and was staring at him like he had insects all over his face. With that kind of response, he certainly felt like he did. Jimmy and Jack were too busy looking at the body. Beverly moved closer, but remained personally away. She pointed out scratch marks etched into the floor, “It looks like she was trying to claw her way out.”

“They must have known each other. Or at least he knew her. It was someone that cared about her.” The last bit of the confusion and betrayal tingled under his skin. He couldn’t remember how it got there.

Beverly let out a sharp breath through her nose. “Cared too much.”

Jack shrugged. “So we are looking for lovers, fellow shopkeepers, suitors, random admirers.”

“Ugh!” Jimmy cried out. He pulled up bits of skin. “This is disgusting. It’s like it flaked off, it seems diseased.”

“Where was that?” Brian asked, disgust strong in his voice.

“It was under her nails. Basically caked up there. She must’ve scratched him deep enough that it stuck to them, but I couldn’t find any blood there, not even dried.”

“Why wouldn’t there be blood?” asked Jack and both men shrugged.

“You don’t know Brian?” Beverly teased.

“Hey! I’m an alchemist! That means potions, herbs, grenades, not body parts!” Brian replied defensively.

Jimmy shrugged, “I mostly just know how dead things look. This seems like a disease, and I don’t know much about those.”

All of them turned to Brian, who sighed. “I’ll get looking.”

“Huh,” Beverly remarked, bending down to look at their unfortunate girl. “It looks like he was trying to peel the skin back.”

Betrayal. Pain. Fear. Sadness. Love.

“Like he was removing a mask,” Will concluded. He had been removing a few masks of his own lately.

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Abigail tugged slightly at the mask on her face, still trying to get used to the feel of it. Sweat beaded along edges and made it itch, regardless of the cool lining soothing her face. Alana sat across from her, dark blue mask highlighting her eyes, which was helped by the silver trim adorning that drew the gaze of onlookers. The older brunette had thought it prudent to celebrate the success of her debut with an outing in the Halamshiral upper market. The rich, wealthy, and libertine roamed the streets, perusing shops and making idle gossip with one

another. Currently, the two were at a small outdoor cafe, enjoying tea and a light late afternoon lunch. The trees nearby were filled with spring blossoms and the warm air was occasionally interrupted by a soft breeze, which caused everything to gently sway.

“Did you get any invitations?” Alana asked.

Abigail let a small smile play at her mouth. To passersby, it would seem coy, maybe even mischievous. “Several. They were all from people that wanted the novelty of having a girl that presumably was a cannibal among their company.”

Alana smiled from behind her cup. “How scandalous.” Abigail rolled her eyes.

“I also got a proposal. It was easy to see that he was being pressured by his parents. I’m unsure if it was for the publicity an engagement would be or if it was to get in Hannibal’s good graces.”

“Probably both.”

Alana sipped from her cup, savoring something imported, apparently from Rivain. Abigail was tasting an Antivan blend, trying to get used to the many spices crossing her tongue. An idle thought had her remember her former life; she would never have been afforded such luxuries as this. The thought left her with some guilt. She should be hating her father for what he did and mourning her mother, but instead she found herself seeming thankful for his crime against them. The tea soured in her mouth.

“What has you making that face?” Alana asked, somewhat amused.

Abigail set her teacup down and swallowed the mouthful. “I just thought about everything that led me here. Makes it hard to enjoy this sometimes.”

Alana’s face fell. “It’s hard to enjoy life sometimes when we remember all the people that fell and hurt to get you there.”

The younger woman nodded. “I feel like I’m not honoring their memory.”

“Every moment you aren’t thinking about them, you feel like you’re forgetting them.”

“Exactly!”

Alana set down her cup as well and leaned forward slightly. It wasn’t enough to invade her space, but it was enough to give the illusion of privacy from the surrounding world, a sobering reminder of where they were and the consequences of speaking too freely. “You don’t have to feel guilty for reveling in the life you have here. Any young woman in your position would and should take ahold of the opportunities as they present themselves. If we’re honest with each other and ourselves, there is a high chance that your old life would have been unpleasant or unsuited. That or you’d be dead.”

Abigail’s smile was sad, even as she acknowledged the truth of the statement. “That doesn’t make it easier.”

“No,” Alana agreed. “It doesn’t. However, it does allow you to take the next step and work on moving your thoughts to the future, rather than the past.”

The younger woman hummed and took up a slice of meat and some thin bread off of the platter. The food was fresh and light, easy on her unhappy stomach. It wasn’t Hannibal’s food or the stuff that was given to her by her parents. That made it better. Unfamiliar fare shared with the woman that had been trying to teach her. Previously, Abigail had been not irritated but resigned to Alana. The woman meddled and bothered, but had clearly been trying to help her adjust. She wasn’t Hannibal, who kept her secrets. She wasn’t Nesiraya, who taught her the secrets of this new world. She definitely wasn’t Will, who had been teaching her of his world before he abruptly pulled away. Alana was someone different and Abigail almost loved her for it.

A tiny part of her wanted to tell Alana. She wanted the older woman to know about Nicholas Boyle, about the girls and what her father made her do, about everything. The larger part that sounded like Hannibal reminded her that telling her made Alana a liability and she didn’t know how Alana would react.

She finished chewing and washed it down with the spicy tea; it burned the coolness from her.

Alana finished the last of her tea and food, then turned to Abigail. “Are you ready to go home?”

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That night saw Will pacing around Hannibal’s study in the man’s suite. The noble, as frustrating as he could be sometimes, had shown in the past a certain support and lack of judgement in Will that was unprecedented and safe. Alana hadn’t seemed to judge before, and neither did Beverly, but both of them also would have told him to stop working with the Seekers. They might even have helped him try to disappear, but it was too important to him that he kept going. Over and over again he had watched as what he had always thought of as a curse helped people. Lives had been saved and as much as he had resented the Seekers of Truth for putting him into this position, it seemed to have been for the better. Jack was another matter entirely; if he said anything to Jack, the Seeker would be obligated to take him off any cases and put him under observation. Jack has always been aware of Will’s detest for the Circle of Magi, but if it was for his safety and the safety of those around them, there was a high probability that Jack would put him there anyway.

“I still have the coppery smell of blood on my hands,” Will despaired. He flitted over to the bookshelves before turning on heel back to Hannibal. “I can’t remember seeing her dead body before I was suddenly killing her. I was in the Fade and I don’t even remember arriving at the scene or the lead up to dreaming.”

Hannibal nodded. He was currently perched on the edge of his desk, supplies gently pushed to one side where he wouldn’t disturb them. “You are aware of their absence, but you cannot bring them to the forefront. They sank out of sight.”

Will nodded and moved a few paces away from the edge of the study, back into the Comte’s sphere. “The whole thing has been making my head hurt so much that I’ve nearly depleted

my supply of herbs. I'm still trying to grasp onto the slick surface of where they're supposed to be."

"Where you hope they're supposed to be," Hannibal pointed out. "You worry they were never there in the first place."

"That they never belonged to me, but to something else," Will stated, feeling more than a little sad. "I suppose that is a general concern for any mage with missing memories." It's more than that though, and he knew that. In his mind, Will is sure that he felt the spirit attempting to hold him back and under, trying to tell him something, but, at the same time he didn't. He couldn't even recall waking up. He was lucky if he was still awake. "There's something else," he began to tell Hannibal. His Lordship perked up slightly. Will sighed and decided to tell a small separate thing on his mind and not the major concern. "What I dreamed was rather grand, but the lingering feelings from the spirit were very different. The actual event that I experienced wasn't necessarily the truth. More so than it usually is with spirits, anyhow."

"And what is?" Hannibal asked, which was a fairly reasonable question.

Will explained, "Part of me is so sure that I killed Beth Le'Beau, but I know that I didn't. Missing memories or no, there was simply no way that I could have. But I remember cutting into her." He got quiet, "I remember watching her die."

"This dream is disguising your reality. You need to fight the delusions that come from them, Will." Hannibal paused and seemed to consider something for a moment. "Perhaps a certain degree of separation could help. What savage delusions are hiding the reality of this killer?"

"Savage?" Will quietly scoffed, trying to keep it from being too rude to the man that was helping him. He felt like he needed to, to keep from breaking down under the weight of Beth Le'Beau's murderer. "I wouldn't call it that. It was lonely." He drew out the word. There was a lot to this killer's world and the isolation seemed to be the biggest part of it. He was trying to find someone and felt betrayed by Beth Le'Beau. Will shook his head to rid himself of the memory and the potential tears. "It was desperate and sad."

Hannibal stood up from the desk and began meandering over to him. "Are you lonely, Will?"

Will shrugged, "Sometimes. Some days more and some days less." He closed his eyes briefly and the feelings rose up again. "Today more than usual. I don't own a mirror, but I did glimpse my reflection as I walked past them in the Winter Palace. When I saw it, I looked right through me, past me, like I was just a stranger." He gestured to the empty air, trying to express the feeling of disconnect that he had been dealing with since he woke up sitting over Beth Le'Bea's body.

"This killer managed to affect you beyond the reconstruction. Will, you must confront your limitations of what you do." Hannibal deflated slightly, not slumping but certainly losing stature. "You make yourself vulnerable and lay yourself prostrate before a host of beings that are drawn to your mind. There is a lot of potential for bad here."

"I don't accept that," Will decided to reply.

“What do you accept?” Hannibal shot back.

Will hadn’t wanted to reveal this, certainly not to Hannibal. “I know what you mean. I have dealt with possession before.”

This seemed to actually take Hannibal aback. “You have?”

Will nodded. “I was with the Avvar for a while, remember? Augurs, Avvar mages, are trained in magic by taking a spirit into themselves once they are old enough to handle training beyond teaching someone how not to accidentally set something on fire.” Hannibal’s face hadn’t changed, but his body language betrayed his rapt attention. “Since I was with the Avvar and was going to be there for the foreseeable future, they wanted me to be taught their way. The Dalish don’t like association with spirits, so I wasn’t really ready to do it, but I did. I was possessed by a spirit of Compassion, and we actually got along very well. I was already a fairly competent mage, so we weren’t together for long, but it was at least a year, perhaps two.”

He stepped back and found himself backed up to the wall. Hannibal was getting in his space, still challenging his assertion with: “Are you sure?”

Will bristled, “I know what possession feels like and this is not it. I panicked a lot at first, because I thought it might be, but after what just happened with Beth Le’Beau, I’m sure it’s not.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Will gestured out with his hands, throwing the thoughts away from him with his words. “A spirit can’t do that. They can’t be the one controlling between the two of you and enter the Fade for any period of time. Not in that way. Either we would be two separate entities or one of us would take over the entire duration of the visit, because only one of us would actually enter. I didn’t see anyone else and I arrived in the middle of the scene. This has to be something else. He glanced at the ceiling, organizing his thoughts. “Maybe it’s something like an illness. They tend to affect people in strange ways.”

“I believe you may dismissing this too lightly. You had one experience with possession; that does not make you an expert on all experiences.”

“And you are?”

“What I am is certain that if this is not possession, then it must be something related to the way that your mind works. You are a dreamer and that comes with certain problems, especially for someone that engages with the Fade as often and in the manner that you do.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “I’m not budging.”

Hannibal hesitated for a moment, physically halting in his space. It was still too close for comfort. “There is a chance that this could be something different.”

“Something different?” Will asked, feeling slightly dubious about where this might be heading.

“Sometimes problems such as these come from elsewhere, such as the mind. It would make you even more sensitive to possession, but it could be something like that.”

Will growled, “I’m not crazy.”

“What is crazy?” Hannibal asked, piercing Will to the core. “Is it not just a word people use to describe those that think differently than themselves? You think differently than most people and they already call you crazy.” He had a point; that didn’t mean he had to like it.

“And what exactly do you propose I do?” Will asked. “It could be any one of those things.”

“There is someone I know that can help with this situation. Hopefully they’ll be able to give an answer.”

Hannibal promised that he would get in contact with his spirit healer friend for Will and let him know what time would be best if he met up with this person. Will thanked him for the information and the dedication to WIll (though he didn’t use those words in particular), before exiting the study.

Upon his exit, Will found himself coming face-to-face with a determined Abigail, who had been on the way to the study. When she saw him, a slight smile appeared on her face, which she quickly banished. “Will!” Abigail said, by the tone of her voice still happy to see him. “I’m so glad you are here; you’re just the person I was hoping to see.”

“Hi Abigail,” he greeted, warmness creeping into his tone. It had only been a couple of days since they had last seen each other, but he was genuinely happy too. He also had a promise to keep. “I was visiting Hannibal, but we’re done for the time being. Would you like to do something together?” His voice was slightly hesitant, as if he was expecting to get rejected. That wasn’t necessarily on his mind, but it had crossed it. It was more likely that they would spend time together and Abigail would realize that he wasn’t worth being around.

Instead the young woman took him up on his offer, linking their arms together. “I know of a couple of places that we can eat,” she said and more or less dragged him off.

The restaurant in question was not pleased to have him. It wasn’t enthusiastic about Abigail either, but they were even more offended by him. Quietly, he voiced this to his companion, who laughed. “Of course they’re being weird. A cannibal girl and a wild elf mage just walked into their cafe.” Well, when she put it like that. “Once we put our number down after ordering, they’ll probably leave us alone.” Will told her that she could order for him, which she warned him about. Hannibal had been refining her palate, but she didn’t have his keen eye for the experience. Will laughed, but didn’t change his mind, which seemed to please her. Good.

Most of the food was light fare. It was still going to be spring for a little more than a month (it could be more or less depending on the weather), so there were greens and delicate plates of cheese and meat. The tea they were given was slightly spicy, but once he made a face

Abigail had them bring out one with a strange, but sweet flavor. She asked for a sip, which he shared with her, and then decided she liked his tea better and then asked for them to be switched out.

It filled him with joy to see Abigail confident and in her element, even if the element was completely foreign to him. She took her privilege with the grace only known to nobles risen from poverty. He was proud of her for taking up this mantle; she wore wealth well.

So, he asked her if anything was new, and she told him an amusing anecdote about a suitor that was terrified of her and clearly only courting her because his parents said so. He offered to sic his dogs on the poor boy, but the younger brunette declined, mentioning that any implication that she had anything to do with it would be detrimental for her.

The time together largely continued like this, both of them basking in each other's company. Will was happy to say that he was glad to spend time with her and promised to do so again soon. They made a plan to meet in three days for lunch. Will escorted her back to her home and privately vowed not to leave her hanging in such a way ever again, before returning home. He had a lot to do the next day.

The mage wasn't looking forward to his dreams after what happened with Beth Le'Beau. His fear of sleep kept him up for far too long before he passed out on the floor, surrounded by his dogs to keep warm.

Will found himself in a parody of his bedroom. All of the furniture were of different sizes and his dogs and any evidence of them were missing. Instead, two ravens hung in the rafters, glittering eyes staring down at him. A large mirror with intricate designs like he had never seen was standing to the side of the room. It was free standing, with the arches going from it little more than decoration. When he sat up, Will felt the breath of the ravenstag on his neck, heard the huffing right behind him, but he didn't dare turn his head. Somehow, he felt like it was important not to.

Instead, he rose and walked towards the mirror. The glass was dark, but lit up once he stood in front of it fully. On its surface he saw the room, his actual bedroom, but he was nowhere to be found. Instead, a long shadow stretched out across the floor from where he should be standing. It was lithe and tall and the longer he stared at it, the more he thought he saw antlers. A raven cawed in the room and suddenly…

Everything was fire.

Smoke quickly began to fill his lungs and his face felt like it was melting. Will didn't have the willpower to stand anymore, no longer able to breathe. So, he leaned against the mirror. It lit up again, only this time it was with actual glowing light. Just as his brain began to comprehend its change, the elf fell through.

Will woke from that dream feeling more resolute than ever to understand its meaning.

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Hannibal had to be very careful about how he was going to proceed with Will's request to understand what was happening to him. The world around was beginning to seem less and less real to him, so he had to find a form of temporary grounding that would reassure him, but ultimately fail. Many months ago, he had smelled illness in Will, but there had been something else. If his suspicions were correct… It wouldn't just be him that Will was contending with. He needed to help Will. The young man's defenses were terrible; if he couldn't manage to keep Jack Crawford and himself at bay, what would happen when a sufficiently powerful demon came knocking. He had already expressed his previous experience with possession, would that make him weaker or stronger against it?

Wouldn't it be interesting to find out?

When Hannibal showed Will where they were going, the elf mage was positively paralyzed. It was a temporary off-shoot Circle in Halamshiral that allowed mages in the area to come and go as needed, usually with a Templar escort or two. It was important that they go here, as Donald Sutcliffe was a very old and very pliable friend that would be perfect for what he had in mind. Spirit healers were rarely the types to deviate from their guardians, and Sutcliffe's was one of Curiosity.

Will would simply have to suffer the stares of the suspicious Templars. He did his best to be between them and Will. It wouldn't do for them to take the elf from him now; he was endlessly fascinating as he was rather than a Templar chew toy.

They found Sutcliffe writing up notes in his office, doing more research on better healing techniques. Magic could heal many things, but some illnesses and injuries were beyond its purview. Mundane healing techniques were becoming all the rage as tensions between Templars and mages grew. That, and magic couldn't be used all the time without overuse of lyrium, which came with its own problems. The healer looked up and smiled. "Comte Lecter!" he greeted and rose to meet the both of them.

"Monsieur Sutcliffe," Hannibal bowed his head. "May I introduce my protege, Will," he gestured to the aforementioned mage, who was trying his best to disappear behind him.

"Protege?" Sutcliffe raised his eyebrows, but maintained his smile. "His Lordship isn't the type to sponsor someone lightly, Monsieur Will. You are in very good hands."

He accepted his compliment with: "You are too kind." Then Hannibal turned to Will to explain, "Monsieur Sutcliffe is actually from Nevarra. I met him when I was doing some research in Montsimmard, and he was a tremendous help in my studies."

"Back when he spent more time with books then with bootlickers," Sutcliffe ribbed, and he had to stifle a laugh. If the man only knew.

"The world is a very practical place. One cannot spend the rest of their lives among books if they want to get practical knowledge."

Sutcliffe waved him off, "Practical knowledge exists to build up theoretical and allows us to examine the world around in a way that has no place there. That and the Fade is hardly a place where one can acquire 'practical knowledge', at least safely."

“Strangely enough, that brings us to the reason for our visit,” Hannibal segued. “As you can probably guess, my protege is a mage himself and we have been having a few issues lately that may be related to spirits.”

“Or it could be disease,” Will put out there. It only managed to just barely not be frustrating. His insistence on it being disease kept him on his toes, but would make his efforts with Will much more difficult. He would have to press harder than he wanted on a few things and hope that they would bend and not break.

“I specialize in the spiritual as well as the physical,” Sutcliffe replied. “I have a few questions I will need to ask, if you don’t mind.” Then, the healer went about with his questioning. It was standard procedure, asking about family diseases and history thereof as well as accidents. Will was very careful to steer around the topic of possession and his past with it. He also felt more than a little uncomfortable with the questions about his family history, which would make sense with the little Hannibal knew about Dalish culture and medicine.

“Any head trauma?”

“A couple of bumps, but nothing severe.”

“So when did the headaches start?”

“About six months ago,” Will replied. “I’ve been using some of my own remedies to abate them, but they’ve been getting worse.”

“Around the time that I met him,” Hannibal agreed. It was as he suspected. “It was a little after Jack Crawford took him along with the Seekers.” Will leveled a stare at him for a moment and turned back to Sutcliffe. It seems the younger man didn’t like being spoken for.

“You mentioned that you’ve been seeing and hearing things. When did that start?”

“Um.” Will thought for a moment. “I’m not entirely sure. I was just suddenly aware that I wasn’t dreaming.”

Sutcliffe tilted his head, “Are your dreams especially vivid? They are for most mages, but once we are out of the Realm of Dreams, reality usually asserts itself pretty strongly.” He paused for a moment then added an exception: “Of course unless the mage is in an area with a thin Veil, but that means they are practically in the Fade, even if they are awake.”

Will sighed and this was what Hannibal thought would happen. Good. This would be sufficient to bait Sutcliffe into wanting to study Will. “I’m a dreamer,” Will said, and dreamers were oh so rare.

“Oh!” Sutcliffe interjected. “That makes a bit more sense then, you’re used to interacting with the Fade with more awareness and consciousness than most.” He wrote a few things down in his notes on Will and then began setting up a table. He covered it with a cloth and some soft substance for comfort of the person lying down. “I’m going to have to ask you to lay on this. What I’m doing is having you go to sleep and then I can examine your spiritual energy for signs of spirits or demons. Afterwards, I’m going to run a few quick healing spells

and see if I can identify any illnesses." Will nodded and laid back on the table. Hannibal could tell that he was still extremely uncomfortable with the whole thing. He didn't take any herbs and Hannibal and Sutcliffe tried for some meaningless idle chatter in the far corner of the room so that they didn't disturb them. It took about fifteen minutes, but eventually the younger mage drifted off.

Sutcliffe moved closer and started a spell that Hannibal had never come across before, but looked very similar to the magic Will had done when he had banished the ghost of Silvestri. After a few minutes, he made a few quick humming noises and then began a healing spell. Hannibal had seen enough spirit healers to know that it was just cursory healing magic, something designed to do just enough healing that it would be able to see what was being healed. It would unfortunately alleviate Will's symptoms and problems on a temporary basis, but if he accomplished his goal with Sutcliffe, then the disease would soon return in full force. After a few minutes, Sutcliffe came over to him.

Before the man could even speak, Hannibal declared, "He's ill."

"Yes, he is," Sutcliffe said slowly, nodding. The 'yes' in particular was very drawn out. "You knew?"

"I concluded," he replied.

"Based on?"

"I could smell it."

Sutcliffe raised an eyebrow. "We've gone from being able to smell perfume and potion ingredients to identifying whether or not a person is diseased?"

"Of course." This answer didn't seem to satisfy Sutcliffe.

"What does it smell like?"

Hannibal closed his eyes, imagining the smell again and trying to find the words to describe it. "It smells like heat. A fevered sweetness. I recall food from Rivain and Tevinter when I bother to check."

"If you suspected, why didn't you say anything?"

Hannibal simply looked at him as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. It was. "How many people would trust the word of a simple smell? I needed to be sure before I took any action."

"And you waited this long to check because?"

"I was being allowed to study a person's worsening condition in real time. It was fascinating to be able to document his deterioration for posterity. We know so little about medicine outside of magic; it will greatly benefit those in the future if I am able to simply observe for the time being. This is especially true for a mind as sensitive as his."

He could see Sutcliffe slowly starting to come around, mind beginning to align alongside his. “We have to weigh the benefits and consequences of this sort of thing. It would be remiss of us to not take the opportunity that will help other people.” He then hesitated for a moment before continuing, “There’s something else as well. When I was reading his signature for the spiritual, I got a ping.” Hannibal raised an eyebrow and indicated for the mage to continue. “It wasn’t much, but I believe that your friend has a spirit attachment.”

“Attachment?”

Sutcliffe moved away from Will and reclined back in his chair, trying to find a way to explain it to Hannibal, presumably without being condescending in his explanation. That or he simply could not think of the words to express what an attachment was. The man had always been verbose, though, so it was likely the former. He spoke, “An attachment is slightly like a possession in the fact that the spirit and the person are connected. It’s only a step below a spirit having a hold of a person. This thing would appear to him whenever and could communicate with him on a very rudimentary level. If he was to actively pursue it, perhaps it could get a hold on him or at least their connection would become strong enough for active dialogue. It could also simply not be interested in that. People seem to look at spirits and immediately see them as demons, but they are very odd creatures.”

Hannibal tilted his head to the side, having a question that could determine what he did with Will on that front. If it was a more aggressive spirit or one that didn’t suit his interests, it would be best to let the younger man know or at least do something about it. “Do you know what kind of spirit it is?”

“That’s the strangest part. I don’t.” Sutcliffe shrugged. “Usually it’s not hard to get a read on these things, but it’s a bit malleable. For a moment, I even had a hard time telling if it was a spirit or demon.”

That was so fascinating. He couldn’t tell if it was a spirit or a demon; there was so much potential there. “Unfortunate for Will, but that only makes me believe that we should observe more.”

“Me as well,” Sutcliffe smiled. From there, both men worked to prepare what they were going to tell poor Will when he woke up from dreaming. The opportunity to work with a mind like that in this kind of situation helped influence a certain kind of greed in Sutcliffe and Hannibal was more than happy to indulge him.

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A snout settled next to his face once he became aware. Before him was a great stag, breathing moistly along his nose. It smelled like rot and permeated his senses. Will even felt it stinging behind his eyes. He cracked them open only to see nothing. His left side tingled and he turned his head in that direction. Beside him laid Beth Le’Beau’s corpse. The ragged tears in her face dripped blood onto the floor beneath the both of them, eyes glassy and dead. Slowly he turned his head back to face the cold, uncaring ceiling.

Will opened his eyes, feeling muzzy. He sniffed a little to get rid of the itching at his nose and the remaining scent of decay that followed him from his sleep. Movement from his side let

him know that someone was in the room. The elf sat up and glanced at the other occupant, which revealed itself to be Healer Sutcliffe.

“You’re awake!” the man said and began rummaging around the room. He produced a small phial filled with green liquid, probably a Stamina Potion. “This should help you be a little more awake. You’re probably feeling a bit stiff as well. I can’t do much about that, but if you have any healing salve, it should help your joints.”

Will tilted his head slightly at the strange statement. “You’re a healer. Shouldn’t you have some?”

“I’m a spirit healer. Never been much of an alchemist or herbalist.” The man raised his hand and sent a small burst of magic at him. It soothed some of the ache, but not much. “As a spirit healer, I can tell you that, while healing magic is helpful, it’s no substitution for real healing and rest. In general it is a lot better to allow your body to do what it needs without being forced to go faster with the Fade.”

“Makes sense,” Will replied and stood up. Slowly, he bent his arms and legs to return feeling to the joints. “So Monsieur Sutcliffe, what are the results?”

The healer sighed. “I’d advise you to sit down, but it is probably better for your body if you stand for the moment.” Odd. “I wasn’t able to find a connection to any spirits or demons and you aren’t sick.”

“What?”

“There’s nothing wrong with your body or your connection to the Fade.” Both of them were silent for a moment, Will trying desperately to process the ramifications around this information. Monsieur Sutcliffe chuckled lightly, but it was a weak and false thing. “Usually when I let someone know about that, they’re happy to hear it.”

“What… what does this mean? Is it in my head?”

Sutcliffe nodded. “It has something to do with your mind. Unfortunately that’s something my magic can’t help with.”

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Hannibal knew that he couldn’t be there when Sutcliffe gave the news to Will, that way the younger man was the only one to corroborate the information. It would further cement his alibi if it was ever necessary later. He left the meeting early with strict instructions to the healer before celebrating a well-planned move with another. He invited Jack Crawford to dinner in his suite.

It had been a significant enough amount of time since Jack Crawford had graced his table for dinner that the other man would be ravenous for his cooking. It entertained him to feed the senior Seeker of Truth some remains from an undiscovered victim somewhere in civilization. Currently the dish was a kind of spiced rice from the Anderfels’ extremely rare environments that were able to make the dish. It was topped with ‘mutton’.

Jack Crawford's presence served as more than just a whim, though. Once the man arrived, he began asking questions about Will. It seemed that Will had been acting strangely (some of which he had already been aware of) and dancing around the topic. It appears the Seeker of Truth was tired of being lied to and wanted straight answers. It was amusing that he was attempting to find them with him; Hannibal decided that this would be an appropriate time to ensure that suspicion could even be placed on Will later. Crawford had grown increasingly protective of Will, and only betrayal from Will (either to Crawford or himself) would make the Seeker do something as drastic as imprisonment. Hannibal was not so naive as to think that the man was incorruptible and would bring down the sword if need be. Hannibal didn't want that to happen either. He needed to sow the seeds of mistrust in both Will and Jack to discredit anything they might eventually say about him.

Guilt worked, too. "You knew from the moment that you grabbed him and brought WIll into your world that you were putting him in danger, both from the evils that awaited him outside and in his own mind."

Jack took a bite and chewed. Then: "I had eight young women dead. He caught their killer."

"He also caught their killer's disease. His waking mind is betraying him. Will can't stop thinking about what it is to take a life."

The Seeker pointed a fork at him across the table, swirling it slightly in the air. "I would rather be plagued by such thoughts than innocents lose their lives, and I think Will would rather that, too."

Hannibal took a bite. "Is Will not an innocent?"

"He is," Jack said. "But he is also an innocent that I know is going to survive. He has had a rough go of it and has managed to keep himself together. Will is genuine. No matter what the world around has put him through, no matter what the malleable Fade puts him through, he always comes back to being Will. I have tremendous faith in him."

Hannibal smiled internally as he pointed out, "Not always. So far." Both men ate for a moment, allowing the silence to fill the space between them. Once the matter felt sufficiently settled, Hannibal brought it back up. "I took him to see a spirit healer. They found nothing wrong with him. He was very upset by that."

This took Jack aback and he set down his cutlery. "He wanted something to be wrong?"

"What he wanted was an answer that wasn't his mind betraying him. Will could handle his body or even his abilities, but his sense of self and perception of the waking world is distorting and that is what he fears right now." Throw out the seeds and watch where they land. Will it be water or rock?

"You believe that his perceptions of the world are betraying him?"

"Will's perceptions have always been a little different. Children have vast amounts of imagination when they are younger and they often were socialized by mirroring others. Those habits never left Will, not truly. He has trouble knowing who he is; it's why he is so good and

melding with the spirits and allowing them to suffuse his thoughts. He is always reflecting those around him." A slight quirk of the lips had to be subdued. Now was no time for celebration. "Jack, when you take him to a crime scene, the very air has screams smeared on it. When he enters, whether the scene itself or the Fade to dream, he doesn't just reflect, he absorbs." He left Crawford with that and returned to his meal. Lighter topics would have to be brought up later to avoid any suspicion that this conversation might bring.

For now, he watched as Jack chewed on everything that he gave him.

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It had been haunting him all, the scene with Beth Le'Beau. He still remembers turning his head and seeing her there. Will had thought that his dreams and nightmares were spirit aided or messages from the Creators, but they- they were only in his head. A product of his messed up mind seeking meaning in this world. If that wasn't real, what did he truly have in this life? Logically, he knew that the Creators had been locked away long ago, but that didn't make anything they said any less real. Was it Fen'Harel, then? Healer Sutcliffe said it wasn't anything spiritual.

Will had to know. So much of what he had been experiencing lately had felt like a dream, wading through thick and murky water. The last place, the last thing, where he knew the difference between reality and the dream was the home of Beth Le'Beau. That is where he would be going. Her corpse and memory lingered in his mind, the reality and unreality of killing her. She appeared to him while he was being examined. Perhaps there would be something to it.

The bakery-house was extraordinarily easy to break into. A thought drifted by about how easy it would have been to kill her. A young woman living on the edge of the city (or at least the edge the authorities cared about), alone, with an easily-broken-into house would have been an easy target or a very unlucky one. With each step, the floor creaked slightly. It was impossibly loud to his ears, even though the elf knew that there was no way that anyone wandering outside of the house would be able to hear him. Still, he watched his step, testing the wood floor for faults before taking his next one. It was slow going, but did a lot to ease his mind. Bringing out a candle and lighting it, Will stepped further into the house and went up the stairs. They were much louder and every screech set his nerves alight. Unfortunately if he wanted to get to the second floor, this route was unavoidable. He settled for deep breaths and taking it slightly quicker, ripping off the bandage.

The upper floor was quiet. He glanced into the washroom and saw that the basin was still filled with bloodied water. It was far too dark for him to see it in actuality, but in his mind's eye it was stained a muddy red. He could taste copper and iron on his tongue. Fleeing the basin, Will found himself standing in front of the bedroom door. He entered.

The room was exactly as he left it, if but a little colder. The blood scraped across and staining the floor was spread out like wings. He made it a lot worse than it originally was, or so he was told. He doesn't remember getting to the original crime scene and doesn't remember what it looked like before. It probably didn't matter at this point, but a part of him still wished for closure. Slowly he took in a breath and let it out. This was real. He was here.

“My name is Will. I’m in the home of Beth Le’Beau-” He paused for a moment. He had thought that he heard a scraping noise in the room. It sounded like it had come from the bed. Slowly, he inched towards it, only guessing at what might be waiting there. “I’m in the home of Beth Le’Beau in Halamshiral.” This noise had to be real, unlike the animals he had heard scratching at the walls. He’d learn to ignore them, but this was too visceral. “It is late in the evening.” He was almost at it. “Very late.”

Suddenly, the bed lifted up and turned over on top of him. Only at the last minute did he manage to step back and watch as a pale and ghostly figure scrambled out from behind it. He couldn’t let the figure leave. He couldn’t let **her** leave? He couldn’t. Will grabbed for her, hoping to slow her enough that he could Mind Blast her or grapple her, but she slipped away, sliding out of her skin.

As Will soon discovered, that meant actually sliding out of her skin. His hand held the dead glove of flesh, and he almost dropped it in a panic. Breathing heavily, he swung the candle back and forth, worried for a moment that it would topple out of the holder while it nearly blinded him. Then, he was in the woods outside of the Alienage, the opposite side of where his home lay. His candle was gone; he presumed that he dropped it at some point. Some part of him knew that she had to still be around here. Beth Le’Beau’s home wasn’t too far from the Alienage.

“It’s sometime in the middle of the night!” he gasped out in a yell. He sounded like he was hyperventilating, something he noted distantly. Still, this was important. The connection he had felt with this young woman since he first felt her in the Fade let him know this much. “My name is Will!” he kept shouting, hoping against hope that she would hear him. “And you’re alive! If you can hear me, you are alive!”

There was nothing for far too long before he finally walked back into town. There was someone that he needed to come with him. He had no evidence that it had actually happened, as the skin glove was gone. Was this tenuous connection in the forest all a dream?

Will had actually anticipated that it would be more difficult to convince Beverly to come with him than it was, much to his shame. All his friend had to do was take in his disheveled and panicking appearance at her family home and immediately let them know that she had something important to do and would be out for a while. That kind of dedication was well-appreciated and he promised her a fair share of breakfast treats that he would be purchasing in one of those frilly noble stalls only for her.

She had an addendum that he needed to go to the one where the proprietor had a thing for him so that he could give her only the best. Said proprietor didn’t have a thing for Will per say, but did have a thing for elves and for mages. Once or twice he heard them muttering about ‘taming his wild curls’ and ‘showing him the proper way’. He supposed this was Beverly’s way of getting revenge for waking her so early. He quietly beseeched the Creators for strength and then brought Beverly to Beth Le’Beau’s home.

It was mostly the same, although they had to use one of Beverly’s candles instead of his own. “Tell me again why we aren’t going to Jack. If you saw the murderer, he needs to know.”

“I’m not- I’m not entirely sure what I saw was real,” he admitted. He had spent so much time trying to convince himself one way or the other and even the ‘grounding exercise’ that Hannibal had given him hadn’t helped as much.

“Then let’s prove it,” she stated and marched her way upstairs. Together they went into the bedroom, and he didn’t have to avoid looking at the blood stain this time. The bed had been turned on top of it.

“So at least that part happened,” Beverly said after Will explained the moment. “So, what happened next?”

“I grabbed her arm and an entire layer of skin separated from it. It was like she was wearing a glove.”

Beverly nodded, “That’s why she doesn’t bleed. Her skin is so diseased it’s forming a layer on top.”

Will agreed, “I saw it a few times in the wild, when a person stayed out there sick for too long without any medical treatment.”

“So what did you do with it?” she asked.

Between trembling breaths, he said, “I don’t know.” He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and saw more than a bit of confusion. Then, her face went carefully blank, but not in the way people do when they are trying to hide something. It looked more like she did when she was concentrating or making calculations.

“I think you’re onto something about the disease idea. This looks like a pretty severe infection,” Beverly commented, trying to move the conversation in the lateral direction. She was eyeing him sideways, but changing the topic, for which he was grateful. She didn’t know about him losing time and she only suspected about the hallucinations. Probably didn’t think about it anymore, considering it was a month ago and she hadn’t said anything since.

“She looked malnourished. Jaundiced. Something about her eyes seemed deranged.”

“I think deranged is putting it lightly, considering that she mutilated someone’s face, because she thought it was a mask,” Beverly put out there. He winced slightly, then worked to try and hide it.

Something about her comment felt wrong. Beverly didn’t understand the situation or the way that this young woman was experiencing the world. “I don’t think she even knew what she was doing. She… she can’t see faces. To her it may have been a demon in her friend’s place.”

Beverly’s brow furrowed. “Then why come back?”

“Maybe,” Will started. He tried not to think about his own reason for coming back here. “Maybe she had a moment of clarity and came back to make sure that she didn’t. To convince herself of it.”

His friend sidled up to him and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. Will flinched slightly, feeling too tense and too strung up to appreciate the gesture for the comfort that it was meant to be. Beverly stared at his face and he kept his eyes away from hers, specifically on her nose. “Is that why you came back?” she asked and Will moved out from under her hand.

“I know I didn’t kill her,” he snapped back and Beverly moved away, looking hurt. “I just want to find out who did.”

“Me too,” she replied. “Why are you so focused on this?”

Will gave a sad smile, “This killer can’t accept her reality as it is. With everything I do, I can occasionally identify with that.”

Beverly smiled back, just as sad. “Alright. Let’s get you back home. We can talk more about this later, when both of us have had a little more sleep.”

The next morning, Will went to seek out Hannibal. As he left his shack, he saw Beverly making her way up to his home. This only made him hurry off, as she was going to ask some questions that he did **not** feel comfortable answering. He had seen how much she was trying to help him lately, but right now he just wanted to be alone. Honestly, he thought that Beverly might also say some hard truths that he didn’t want to hear or try and convince him to stop working with the Seekers or, Creators forbid, join a Circle.

His Lordship was kind enough to easily grant Will an audience. He had yet to see the Empress again, but the fact that the guards let him in easily only made him more nervous. There was this sense hanging over his head that all of this favor was going to bite him in the ass later. Hannibal greeted him the same as always and let him into the study. There, he had some wine already set out, as if he was anticipating Will’s arrival. Quickly, Will beat down the part of him that would be so presumptuous. Once that part was sufficiently ignored, he took the proffered glass and sat down on the lounge.

“It’s good to see you Will. Did you rest well?”

“I-um. I didn’t,” Will said and then explained the situation. Throughout the entire explanation, Hannibal was calm and collected. His face was cool, but not icy. Only stoic enough to keep from betraying his thoughts and not isolate his conversation partner. No wonder he was so popular at court.

“What was it about this that struck you so?” Hannibal asked.

“I felt like I was seeing a ghost,” Will said. “I feel like I’m still seeing one.”

His Lordship tilted his head slightly; Will thought he might have seen some concern or curiosity shining in his eyes. It was hard to tell. “Are you speaking about this killer or yourself?”

It seemed to be in fashion for people close to him to ask pointed and complicated questions. “Both,” Will replied. He was haunting his own world and lingering in the dead spaces, drifting between the realms of the living and of dreams.

“You are real, Will. She’s real and you know that she is. The death of the poor, young baker is evidence enough and clearly you felt the impression she left on the world,” the noble said. His simple reassurance didn’t feel like much of one, but it should have been. “When you saw her, you did not slip away.”

“Time did.”

Hannibal nodded. “I spoke with the healer about what happened. We briefly discussed it, but would you rather discuss the particulars with me?”

Will scoffed, irritated that this was being brought up. It had already been bothering him quite a bit and being reminded of his tenuous grip on this realm. “There are no particulars. He didn’t find anything wrong.”

“Then we keep looking for answers,” his Lordship stated. “Would you mind if I did some of my own investigations?”

“Own investigations?” Will asked. “I did not know you knew anything about the Fade or even had a connection to it.”

“I have learned a few simple things to keep someone on this side in a more mundane fashion.”

Will glanced around to the many **many** tomes meticulously perched on the shelves of the study, covering the room wall to wall. “Just don’t write anything about it. At least while both of us are still alive to deal with it.”

“Who would you prefer to be left behind with the consequences?”

“Either. I’m feeling generous.”

Hannibal shifted in his chair and took a generous sip of his wine. “Speaking of connections to the Fade, have you considered this young woman having one?”

“A connection to the Fade?” Will asked, but the possibilities were running through his mind. Her signature had felt so strange and foreign, the footprint stronger and weaker at the same time.

“You talk about her mental state with a distinctly dream-like wording,” was the reply he was granted. He supposed that was true. She existed in a dream, so it felt appropriate. “You mentioned that she seemed to not realize what she was doing at the time. Maybe she doesn’t believe that she is real, so the world around her must not be as well.”

“She was trying to uncover the victim’s face. Trying to peer behind a mask that only she could see,” Will whispered. “She reached out for help, some she loved. She felt betrayed and became violent.”

“If the world is not real, nothing is solid nor tangible. She can’t trust anything or anyone to be what they should be.”

“Malleability,” Will whispered. “The world is only truly that way in the Fade, but she felt weaker there.”

“Weaker or less present?”

It struck him then. What kind of person was so disconnected from dreams that they existed solely in them? “She was Tranquil.”

The noble remained impassive. “Why do you say ‘was’?” Isn’t Tranquility permanent?”

Will nodded, the revelation precluding anything other thought or nicety. “I thought so as well, but she isn’t anymore? Her connection to the realm of dreams, of emotions, and of identity was cut off, but now it’s back. Her disconnect has been so strong for so long that the influx of emotions, associations, and attachments doesn’t feel real.”

“She will latch on to what does,” Hannibal said and a small pit formed in Will’s gut. The consequences of the night before may have yet to be felt.

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Jack’s concern for the young Will had grown lately, and he told his wife so. After so much time spent with the rest of the squad, the senior Seeker had thought he was seeing progress. The elf mage was laughing and engaging with the rest of the team, but ever since Laurence, it had gotten bad again. Seeing as Jack was responsible for the actions and the lives of these people, his worry about one of his ‘sons’ (as Bella put it) was an important undertaking. Will was the most vulnerable of all of them, and Jack wasn’t just talking about his general sensitivity.

He had been trying to keep his concern from Bella. She often felt protective and just as attached as he to his team and he didn’t need to give her one more problem. The love of his life was already dying; that was plenty for her to deal with. Of course, she didn’t see it that way, and he wasn’t sure why he thought for a single solitary moment that he could keep something like this from her.

It happened while he was trying to get ready for the day and grab a couple of moments’ peace before the inevitable insanity began. She marched right up to him while he was eating and stared him down, mid-mouthful. “Yes?” he asked, trying to keep his tone as inquisitive and innocent as possible. If he had eyelashes, he would bat them.

“Jack,’ she said, voice speaking volumes by the simple way she said his name. ‘Don’t try and pretend,’ it said. ‘I know you too well,” it said. It also said that if he tried to lie to her, he would regret it.

“Yes, darling?” he replied and tried not to let her know that he was affected. She already pulled the illness card to get him to fetch her things every now and then, knowing that even if he knew what she was doing, her husband would still acquiesce.

“Jack. We used to talk about everything that was going on in your life, and that includes work. Ever since we moved up to Halamshiral, you’ve been keeping it from me.”

He deflated. “I know. It’s just that you have a lot on your plate right now. I don’t want to worry you with something else, too.”

Something in her face changed. Bella had always been more than decent at masking her feelings from the crowd, but Jack saw the moment when she had an epiphany. She sat down in the chair next to him and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “When I first got sick, I wanted to keep it from you. I thought that you already had so much on your plate; being a Seeker is a lifelong commitment. It was important for me to remember that so is a marriage, and I was lucky enough that the Comte reminded me of that. We are woven together; not the same being, but two beings intertwined. We have lived more of our lives with each other than without. That means that we need to share everything, unless we won’t those secrets to pull us away from one another. Remember what my mother said to us?”

Jack nodded and let the happiness she brought him fill him. “Communication is the key to a long marriage.”

“So tell me.”

He leaned into Bella and wrapped his arms around her; she scooted the chair closer so that they could hold each other. “I’m worried about Will.” He looked to her and she nodded for him to continue. “He had been engaging with the rest of the squad. He wasn’t changing himself for them, I think, but he was making an effort to be sociable. Now, it’s like the complete opposite happened. Before, he would engage slightly, but he is actively trying to avoid speaking more than necessary.”

“That is worrying,” Bella replied. “Can you pinpoint when this started?”

“I noticed it when we were dealing with that mage, Laurence, but it could have been happening earlier. The only one that he talks to outside of dealing with work is Beverly, and I’m glad he still has her, but how long until he shuts her out to?”

“Have you tried talking to him?”

“A little after what happened previously. He told me that he was lost, confused. I just don’t know what to do. I can’t force him or coerce him into telling me what’s wrong. That would just make him resent me.”

“And have him try to undermine your authority,” Bella pointed out. “It is difficult to tell those that we care about that something’s wrong.” At that she gave him a look. “It goes back to our previous topic; communication may be the key, but it is difficult. If you try and help him behind his back, I don’t think he would appreciate it when he found out. Unfortunately, this is one of those times where you need to be patient and let him come to you. The worst thing you can do is try and invalidate his independence.”

They leaned their heads together and basked in the comfort that it gave them. “You’re right,” Jack admitted.

“Rarely am wrong,” she replied and they both chuckled. “Is there anything else you want to talk about?”

A quick turn of his head and he was kissing the corner of their mouth. A smile spread against her cheek. “Maybe.” She laughed and turned to kiss him in turn, both enjoying the slowly building passion between them.

Whatever may have happened next was interrupted by a knock on the door. Jack sighed as he pulled away. Only a few seconds passed before the knock came again, slightly more frantic. “It seems our time is up. I’m betting that it’s work.”

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Jack had told Will to meet him at the barracks post-haste, so he left as soon as he could. Beverly agreed to watch the dogs for him, but also reminded him that they needed to have a talk later. Will tried to appear as amiable as possible in front of his friend, while privately vowing to do everything possible to stay out of her way. It wouldn’t work forever, but it would work long enough for him to get a proper excuse.

Upon his arrival, he was greeted by a disgruntled Jack and a woman about the same age as the Seeker. She was wispy and a little underfed. She probably was one of the few lower class humans that lived in the city. She glanced up at him when he walked in, taking a second glance at his pointed ears, before settling back into her chair. “This is Jocelyn Madchen,” Jack said at his raised eyebrows. “Her daughter is Georgia Madchen, a good friend of Beth Le’Beau and a Tranquil, and she has been missing from the Montsimmard Circle for the last three months.”

Oh.

Jocelyn looked like she was on the verge of tears, “I was almost relieved when I got the message. Everyone had been talking about what had happened to Beth and the guards came around asking about a young girl that was Tranquil and I thought-” The heaviness on her voice broke and she took in several deep breaths, calming herself. “I thought that you had found her and she was… would be at peace.”

Will furrowed his brow. “You thought that she might be dead?”

Madame Madchen let out a sad and self-deprecating laugh. Nothing was funny. “I sound like a horrible mother, don’t I? I tried to be a good mom for Georgia, but I wasn’t equipped for a mage child.” She leaned forward, readjusting her skirt. “At first, I tried to hide her from everyone, do everything for her and keep her away from the Circle. We hear strange stories that range from wonderful to horrible, but I had always heard more bad than good. Then, I found out the hard way that it isn’t that easy. I wanted her to be happy and not to be in pain, so I sent her away.”

“No one is doubting your dedication to your daughter, Madame,” Will assured. Part of him wanted to doubt it, but being a mage is such a unique experience and without the help that he had, the world would have been a much more dangerous place. Madame Madchen said that she wasn’t equipped for a mage child, he believed her.

“How well did she know Beth Le’Beau?” Jack asked, cutting to the chase.

“They were best friends,” Jocelyn said. “They were always playing together, until it was unsafe for Georgia to leave home. I think they sent letters back and forth until Georgia became Tranquil.”

Jack asked the question on Will’s mind. “You say ‘became’ not ‘made’?”

Something on Madame Madchen’s face broke, the expression a little sad, a little manic. “She chose to do it. Georgia was only twelve, but everything became too much for her. The Knight Commander told me that she had begged her to stop the voices in her head and the monsters in her dreams. When the Knight Commander told Georgia about the Rite of Tranquility, she… she said yes.” Jocelyn gave a small sob. “My daughter was twelve and, if what I’m told is correct, a very weak Dreamer. She couldn’t do more than affect small things, but that’s enough for demons to become commonplace. It’s part of the reason I sent her away; I wasn’t enough anymore. The chance for relief was probably too tempting to pass up. I only wish they had waited until she was a little older and understood what it entailed.”

Will froze. He could sense Jack’s eyes on him, but it didn’t matter.

“You knew she was a dreamer before you sent her away?” Jack asked.

She nodded. “I suspected. She would fall asleep in strange places. Sometimes, we’d be doing stuff during the day and she’d just freeze up. Everytime I would try and rouse her, she just drifted away, dreaming with her eyes open. A couple of times, she would break these spells by falling to the ground screaming for the voices to go away.” Jocelyn gathered herself for a moment, combing fingers through her hair to tame its loose strands, before continuing, “I remember one time after I punished her for something small; Maker I don’t even remember it. She looked me in the eyes and said, ‘The voices promised me I could have a new mama that won’t put me in time out so much. Maybe I should say yes.’ It was such a silly childish thing, but when you know your child is routinely contacted by demons, it becomes threatening.”

“Did she routinely threaten you?” Jack asked, looking slightly alarmed.

“No!” Jocelyn yelled. “No. It was the presence of the demons that was threatening, never Georgia herself.”

“And she was never violent?”

“No more than normal little children. It just happened that her ‘normal’ involved setting things on fire.” She glanced at Will. “You know how mage children are; they can’t really control themselves. Dreamers are worse than normal.”

Will cut in before Jack could speak, “After she became Tranquil, did you have much contact with her?”

She shook her head. “No. No, I am ashamed to say I didn’t. I went to the Circle once, hoping to check on her. It was a couple of months after I got the news, so maybe half a year after? I think it was her thirteenth birthday. I remember going up to her and trying to give her a hug and she didn’t move a muscle. I told her I loved her and asked her how she was and my little

girl replied in the flattest voice about how she was well and that she recalled feeling fondness for me. I had never met a Tranquil before that. When I started to break down in front of her, she just stared at me with blank eyes and apologized for distressing me. Her little voice had no emotion at all." Tears began to leak from Madame Madchen's eyes. "She called me 'mother'. I had never heard her call me anything other than 'mama' before. It's such a silly thing."

The grieving mother looked to both of them. "Please find her. When she disappeared, they didn't tell me what happened, but it didn't sound like she was doing well. I don't know what it did to my daughter, but I just want her to be safe."

"We'll do our best, madame," replied Jack. "There's a chance that Tranquility had an adverse effect on your daughter."

"Adverse effect? Magic is still so foreign to us, but for mages it is an intrinsic part of them. To cut that off…" She leaned forward towards Jack so Will had to strain to hear. "I thought when you brought him into the room that maybe you understood. I still don't know one way or the other. You cannot treat mages like other people and I don't mean that in a bad way. Magic changes everything and that includes the way you experience the world. Manage your expectations or you're going to lose him."

Will understood Madame Madchen's intentions behind her comment to Jack, but that didn't make him any more enthusiastic about the sentiment. He waited until they were in the office and made sure it was definitely a private space before he struck. "Are you **managing** your expectations, Jack?" he drawled, barely holding in his annoyance.

Jack turned to him, not getting in his space, but allowing his stature and presence to do it for him. "Changing my expectations." Then the man backed up and sat on the edge of the desk, trying to keep his posture casual. "You know, when Miriam Lass died, I was stuck. I wondered if I should return to the Bastion and turn over my armor, allowing myself to be sent to the Sea of Ashes. Then, that got to be too overwhelming, so I was ready to just go there myself. I think I started the letter to tell Bella three, maybe four times. I had gotten a novice killed, a bright one too. That lack of leadership, that was my responsibility."

Will furrowed his eyebrows. "You didn't kill Miriam Lass," he stated clearly, enunciation punctuating the words. "The Highwayman did that."

Jack shrugged and settled his weight on the desk. His hands were clasped in front of him, knuckles betraying the fact that they were slightly clenched, or at least tensed. "I didn't feel that way. I'm the one who started taking her from her trainers and her lessons. Maybe if I had left her alone the Seekers would have one more upstanding member among their number." Jack pointed at him slightly. "Maybe I should have left you alone too. Now you can't leave or some higher ups will be alerted of your presence."

"She was young and inexperienced. If I have to go, I still can figure out a way." Will tried to keep some of the bite out of his voice, but he wasn't entirely successful. The elf understood that Miriam Lass was a well defined young woman, but she was just an apprentice. He had been taking care of himself for a while.

“And? That’s not what I’m getting at WIll. I’m still just as responsible for you as I was for her.”

Disgruntled, Will replied, “I’ll take my own responsibility, thank you.”

Before he even finished the sentence, Jack had already started, “Not from me you won’t. We will do this together. I broke the rules with Miriam; I encouraged her to break the rules. I am only barely not breaking them with you.”

“By allowing a mage to join you in the field,” Will rolled his eyes.

“At this point you’re basically a Seeker yourself. If I thought that the higher-ups would approve it, I would have already put it through.”

Will allowed that to sink in. “Oh.” Admittedly that was flattering. Jack thought that he was basically a Seeker? It would never happen, first and foremost because the Seekers of Truth were a religious organization devoted to the Maker, whom he didn’t believe in.

“That means you represent us.” Not something that he actually wanted to do. “You represent me.”

A beat. “Have a misrepresented you Jack?” Unlike the Seekers as a whole, Will actually cared about what Jack individually thought of him. The older man had actually seemed to care about him, even if he was more focused on the tasks at hand. He treated him just like he treated the rest of the squad, which was nice.

Jack’s expression softened. “No. you haven’t. But I am curious, why are you still here when both of us know this is bad for you?”

“I thought that was obvious,” Will replied, thinking of his presence being known to a group known as the Seekers. If he wasn’t here, he would be in one of the Circles by now. At least with Jack, he could live his life outside of that. “Are you trying to get me to leave?” he asked, a little confused by the turn-around.

“I’m not, but there was a moment when you seemed to want to and I gave you the opportunity. You didn’t take it.” That much was true. “I think you didn’t, because this work has given you a sense of stability that roaming from town to town didn’t. Stability, especially with the experiences you have on a daily basis, is good for you.”

“It also requires strong foundations. In case you didn’t notice, mine are built on shifting sand.”

Jack looked him straight in the eyes and, for once, Will allowed him. “I’m not sand; I am bedrock.” He stood up from the desk, but made sure to not seem intimidating. “When you doubt yourself, you don’t have to doubt me too.”

Something to fall back on? Jack was offering to be his help and an anchor. While on another day, Will might have found this condescending, the sincerity in his boss’s voice was startling and comforting. Will knew that there was a lot that Jack still didn’t understand, but he had a

feeling this was him trying to. The elf nodded to Jack and he seemed relieved. So, Will went home. He needed to prepare himself to meet with Abigail tomorrow. The two of them had something planned for the day, an appointment he couldn't afford to miss. There was a lot that he was still keeping from Jack, but maybe, just maybe, he could rely on the man like he had come to rely on Beverly and Hannibal.

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Inviting Healer Sutcliffe over to his home was exceedingly simple. Empress Celene's rather lax policy towards mages gave Hannibal a distinct lack of paperwork or documentation, so no one would know that he ever was there. He requested that the spirit healer be wearing plain clothes; Sutcliffe probably assumed that it was to draw less attention and it was. Only it wasn't for the reasons that the man probably assumed.

Oh he already knew that he was going to kill Sutcliffe. His own beliefs and then some about what was going on with Will were confirmed and he had a plan in place it ever came down to it. He was a loose end, one that need not be there in the first place. It's not like the Templars would make a fuss over one less mage. The only real question is when and how. There is a strong chance that he would need to find a way for Will to potentially be responsible. It need not ever be put into place, but going on as he was without a plan unwise in the extreme.

He had prepared the meal himself. It was a quaint meat dish that had resurged in popularity in Orlais recently: the nesting roast. Of course, he served the dish with one of his personal favorites as far as wine went, the Finale by Massaad.

"Ah!" Sutcliffe exclaimed when he brought out the meal. "A nesting roast! I've never had one before." He looked slightly less enthusiastic the longer that he stared at the roasted swan placed on the table, which he had worked very hard to preserve in form. "What is in it again?"

"The swan is stuffed with a pheasant, which in turn has been stuffed with a quail. The empty spaces are filled with spiced sausage, which I made myself." Carefully, Hannibal carved up the dish, revealing the insides to his guest.

"More hidden within," the healer said and began tucking in to his portion. "It's strange how a seemingly simple dish can turn out to be so much more."

"Simplicity is a matter of perspective," was his own reply (and opinion). "It is made or broken by our own experiences and values.

"Heh. Bother to peer back the outer shell and you'll find something underneath." The other man took a bite. "What made you bother with your own simple swan?"

Strange wording. If the mage was talking about whom Hannibal believed he was talking about, that wasn't a fair assessment and a slight insult. "Are you speaking of Will?"

Sutcliffe chewed ignorantly. "Who else? What peaked your interest enough? What did you see beneath his skin that you wanted to dig for it?"

Hannibal chewed both of the meal and his thoughts. Words needed to be considered carefully in these sorts of situations; he could hardly afford to kill the man here, even if it came down to it. So, his words needed to keep suspicion from being enough where Sutcliffe didn't immediately go running for the guard. A quieter part of himself only wanted someone to sit aside with and talk about Will. Bedelia was no longer appreciating that topic of conversation, if her alcohol consumption level when the elf came up was any indication. "Will is a remarkable mage, a dreamer in fact. It is not only that, though. He has a remarkably vivid imagination and pure empathy. Nothing he can't understand and that terrifies him. It's beautiful, in its own way."

'So you set his mind on fire," Sutcliffe said. Despite the casualness of his words, there was a hint of wariness there, as if he wasn't expecting that kind of answer from him. "With him being a dreamer, isn't that dangerous?"

"What isn't?" he asked, as if that was the answer that Sutcliffe had been waiting for. Clearly, his phrasing and constant working to associate him with pleasant interactions had done something, because any suspicion the man had melted away. Hannibal felt safe to continue. "Imagination can do so much to a mind uninhibited. I merely broke off some of his inhibitions."

"And how far is this going to go?" the healer asked, and that's when he knew that Sutcliffe had to die sooner rather than later. "Are we going to put out the fire or simply let him burn?"

In as calm as a voice as he could muster, Hannibal said, "Will's my friend. We'll put out the fire when it is necessary." The mage's face didn't look like he felt any better with that statement, but it wasn't suspicion, merely discomfort.

"Don't worry," Hannibal said. "He won't suspect a thing."

He was going to make sure of it.

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Will had promised Abigail that they would have lunch together, and so they did. It was at a small cafe that Alana had taken her to only a few days ago, and she told him that she was ecstatic to take him there too. Apparently it was called Belle Vie. Unfortunately, he didn't speak Orlesian, but Abigail had been learning and said it meant Beautiful Life. At least, that's what she thought it meant.

The cafe was outdoors but small, intimate really. Not in a weird way, but in a comfortable one. The edges of it were bordered by a small half wall, the only thing separating them from the bustling shoppers in Halamshiral's market. Since they were outside, the natural lighting kept everything bright and the spring breeze kept them comfortable.

"You know, this is the first time since I got it that I've actually felt good wearing the mask," Abigail said. He had noticed on their previous outing that she was constantly picking at it, but she had seemed less bothered by it so far. A server brought out several little tea cakes and a finger food platter, which Abigail ate delicately. It was strange and encouraging to see her in this kind of environment. Her clothes were well-made and stuffy, but she was comfortable

despite this. They talked, mostly about her lessons and he discussed some spell books with her.

Then, he was at home. Will had no memory of how he got from eating with Abigail to his house, nor did he remember the rest of the afternoon. The elf came to while he was in his room, mid taking off his armor. He could hear his dogs barking and traipsing in the main room and rushed into it.

Rolling on the floor in clothes better suited for it was Abigail. The light outside the window let him know that it was early evening with the sun just starting to dip into night. She looked up at his frantic face. “Will? Is everything okay? I know you said not to get rough with them, that they’re war dogs, but I can’t help it, sorry. You don’t need to worry though!”

Will shook his head back and forth, trying to dislodge the panic seeping in. Now was not the time for him to freak out. He swallowed. “No, you’re fine. I just became aware of how late it was.” Quite literally in fact. “I should probably take you home.”

The look on her face let him know that she didn’t actually believe him, but Abigail didn’t argue. Will began his gentle escort home, all the while trying not to scream about what had just happened. He avoided going inside the palace, which only made Abigail eye him more, but his entire being was screaming. Eventually, she agreed to go inside, but he knew this wasn’t over.

Will had lost time around Abigail. There was a period of several hours simply gone. They vanished into nothing. He had no clue what happened during that time; he was too afraid to ask Abigail and tip her off about what was going on. She didn’t need that in her life. This is exactly what he was worried about. What if he hurt her while they were together? He wouldn’t even have known.

A voice inside his head whispered, “See? See?” and chuckled darkly. This needed to stop.

After the incident with Abigail, Will was ashamed to say that he was spooked. Yes, he understood what both Hannibal and Healer Sutcliffe said meant that he was seeking answers in the wrong direction, but, admittedly, he was desperate. He had to be sure and he hoped that Healer Sutcliffe could tell him something else, something new. He didn’t know, but maybe something had changed.

So, Will reached out to Sutcliffe once more, hoping that the man would be willing to see him without Comte Lecter by his side. The man was surprisingly eager, asking to see him that very night. The healer explained to Will that he had found a few avenues that he hadn’t thought to explore before and thought that they could shed some light on his condition. It was encouraging to see him take so much interest in Will’s well-being. Not many would while knowing him so little.

“I have a few tests that I still want to try. There’s a chance that they might give us some answers,’ Sutcilffe had said as Will took some herbs to go back to sleep. The last thing Will saw was the healer milling about the room, looking for some books, and the candles burning low.

It was fairly quiet. Will opened his eyes to a stream, the sound of moving water muted, hands cupped over his ears. It rushed past him gently. He was lying in it, head tilted back against the minute current. He could feel the water brushing past his curls, caressing the sides of his cheeks. He wasn't naked, so it filled his clothes, dragging them against his flesh. It soaked through touched his skin, flushing out of the inside of his leggings. He was surrounded.

The stream had been freezing. That he didn't notice until it was suddenly very warm. It became painfully hot and it stung against exposed flesh. Will opened his eyes, but there was still only water and the endless void.

When Will opened his eyes, he was alone.

The candles had gone out and warmth that had come from the fire in the next room was gone. His bones were chilled, still expecting the painful heat of his dream. Gingerly, he moved around and off the table, taking care not to disturb the fabric and pillows too much. "Healer?" he called out and only heard his own voice echo back. The elf knew that this particular Circle had been fairly empty, but surely one or two mages were here? Someone had to have heard him; they were probably all asleep. "Healer Sutcliffe?" Will called again. There was still no answer.

Predictably, he didn't feel super comfortable leaving the room. This was a Circle sanctuary; there were going to be Templars and he was obviously not a Circle mage. Healer Sutcliffe had been his escort in and would be his escort out. After a few more moments, he decided it wouldn't matter. He'd just explain that Sutcliffe was who he was looking for. Quickly, he grabbed his staff and bag of supplies, then exited the room.

Instead of avoiding Templars, Will decided the best thing to do would be go directly up to one. It was a ballsy move and they wouldn't expect it. At least then he could call for them to get Jack and not have any big men and women in armor laugh in his face. The one he found was, luckily, very easy-going and quickly capitulated to helping find Healer Sutcliffe. They showed him the way to where the spirit healer was staying, but, as they drew closer, both noticed there was blood on the door handle.

The Templar quickly pushed Will behind them (he'd have to ask later, but for now they were 'them' and 'the Templar') and readied their weapon. With the person with a ridiculous amount of armor and a mace and shield combo in front of him, Will felt a lot better. They inched closer and cracked open the door. Neither person breathed. Inch by inch, second by second, the Templar continued to crack open the door and both of them waited for something to happen.

Nothing happened. Not to them anyway. However, upon opening the door, they were greeted to the sight of a mangled and dead Healer Sutcliffe. His body was splayed out at his desk, head nearly torn in two and blood pooling on the floor. Will followed the Templar as they approached the body, despite the fact that this was exactly not where he wanted to be. He just kept walking closer, no matter how much his thoughts screamed to run. His hands went lax as he dropped all of his belongings in the pools and he felt it as his entire thought process shut down.

Distantly, he noticed as the Templar turned to him and he thought he could see their eyes widen beneath their helmet. The floor went from under him and they dove to keep him from injuring himself.

The Seekers and Templars were milling about the scene, many of them trying to find any cools or trying to clean up the mess that was once Donald Sutcliffe. Will kept finding himself glancing over at the body, muscles straining against the orbits rotating in their sockets to see the carnage. It was… saddening knowing that Hannibal's healer friend died because of what happened. The Templar that had helped him earlier was also getting checked over and kept glancing in his direction. They seemed pretty concerned about what just happened, but didn't dare approach him. It was probably for the best.

That Georgia might have killed Monsieur Sutcliffe because of his association with Will just made the bite sting a little more. If stuff like this would always happen and keep happening, Will couldn't afford to get anyone else involved. Who knows what the next murderer that wanted to contact him would do to anyone that he made new contact with. There were plenty of people at work that still hung out with him, but that probably wouldn't last much longer. If nothing else, Will would discourage the contact.

Beverly let go of his bag and staff, relinquishing I back into his care. Blood was still soaking the bottom of the bag and he knew that he was going to have to exchange it for a new one. "While your stuff may be soaked, I checked you and you're clean. There's no way that you could have done this."

"Clean?" he asked, voice strangled and cracking, just this shy of going into a panic. He let out a small laugh, "I don't feel clean."

Jimmy came over to the two of them, holding something. It was the skin of the palm and fingers of someone's hand, still attached to a knife. "You can easily see that it's the same stuff we found at Beth Le'Beau's home."

Jack was talking with one of the guards about making a perimeter, but seemed to have overheard them. The Senior Seeker made a beeline for them and just stared at the skin for a moment. "What connection does this victim have to the first?'

Will sighed and pointed his thumb vaguely in his own direction, "Just me." He clasped his hands together and breathed sharply in and out.

Jack eyed him. "Do you remember anything? Anything that would be pertinent?"

"Coming here," Will said. "I went to sleep so that I could be observed. When I woke up, all of the Templars were gone and I went looking for someone. That's when I found Monsieur Sutcliffe." He gestured vaguely to the body.

The Seeker paused and then seemed to remember something, "No confusion?"

He shrugged. Confusion was vague enough that he felt that he could be honest. “Not that I’m aware of.” Will glanced at the nearly decapitated man out of the corner of his eye and tried to focus his gaze back at Jack. The man seemed disconcerted and concerned.

“Why were you seeing a healer, Will?”

Will sighed. “I’ve been slightly concerned about a couple of points of contact with spirits and with my physical health. I decided to go to someone that could help me with both matters, and spirit healers are the safest kind.”

“And Circle healers make a habit of seeing Dalish?” Jack accused more than asked. It wasn’t an accusation that placed guilt, but more of one that was sniffing out a lie. Unfortunately Will wasn’t lying. He was simply omitting a few details.

“Monsieur Sutcliffe was very accommodating to a Seeker-affiliated mage,” Will replied, stressing ‘Seeker-affiliated’. The man had been extremely helpful in understanding just what was happening to him. Rather, what was not happening to him.

“So Georgia Madchen followed you here and, while you were busy dreaming, killed your guide?”

The elf shrugged. It seemed like the thing to do considering that the young woman’s behavior was extremely erratic and hard to pin down. It was completely expected, considering that she probably spent the last few years without any sort of emotion or identity. The world is backfiring on her. There had to be so much in her head that the crammed in bits and bobs were shoving their way free.

“Everything feels like a dream. It must be a strange, hazy sort of reality… I wouldn’t be surprised that in her zealousness to expose its false trappings, she didn’t realize that she was burying her knife in the truth.” Will fiddled slightly with his leggings and tunic, feeling suddenly exposed in the face of all these Seekers and guards. Law enforcement. “Maybe, um, maybe she thought he was me.”

“While we’re at it, why you?” Jack asked. He subtly stepped in-between Will and the bulk of the guards that he did not know, apparently reading his discomfort with the situation.

“I don’t know, Jack,” Will replied, feeling at a loss. “The night that I saw her, I tried to tell her that she was alive. Maybe she heard me.” He paused, the dawning realization granting him a kinship with this strange girl. “Maybe that hadn’t occurred to her in a while.”

Beverly offered to walk him home, and, in a move that Will had been trying to do the opposite of for the last couple of days, Will agreed. At the moment, though, he needed the comfort of a friend. His nerves were on fire and he was paranoid that Georgia Madchen would come at him at any moment or that someone else would get hurt. He didn’t feel like he could afford to be by himself, which seemed at odds with his earlier plan to be by himself. It still didn’t change how he felt. At least with this, he could get the conversation with Beverly over with, and she wouldn’t spend the night worrying about whether or not he got home safely.

“How are you doing, Will?” she asked, walking in tandem with him. They stepped in time, Will concentrating on their feet and shuffling when they moved out of it. Anything to distract himself.

“I could be better,” was all he said. It was a very big understatement, but she didn’t call him on it, not yet at least.

“I know I said it already, but you didn’t kill him. I don’t just mean actually kill him, I mean cause his death as well. You can’t take responsibility for something like that, not from her. If you do that, you are saying that she has no agency and-”

“What agency?” he laughed out, it felt more like a sob. It probably sounded that way as well. “Her world is a distortion of itself. After a decade of being without emotions, dreams, or identity, it’s all come rushing back. It’s so real that it, too real. I bet she feels like this is all a bad dream that she needs to wake up from.”

“Is that what you’ve been feeling?” Beverly asked. Great. Now they were getting to have this conversation.

Will exhaled, letting some of the tension in his muscles release. There wasn’t much he could do to move her from this subject; he was the one who told her about how he could sympathize with not feeling connected to reality. “Not exactly, Beverly. I know that reality is not a dream. My problem comes from wondering if my dreams are reality.”

“What do you mean by that?” She was being so earnest in her inquiry. A part of him was a little bitter that she hadn’t noticed what he meant or that Jimmy or Brian hadn’t noticed anything at all. A larger part thought maybe they did notice and were just not saying anything to him. Which would he honestly prefer? He didn’t know.

“The Fade is such a vivid place,” Will tried to explain without giving too much away. He had been assured that no spirit or demon was involved, but that didn’t do anything for others. It would look and sound like one was involved, and he couldn’t afford that. He was already on the edge of going crazy in the eyes of a lot of the people he dealt with; he didn’t need Jack and Beverly to feel that way and lose two more people.

“That makes sense,” she said. Neither of them spoke for a while. Eventually they arrived at his house, and she turned to him, “Would you like me to stay?”

Will took a quick assessment of how he was feeling before nodding to her. There was some slight relief in her eyes. “Got any alcohol?” she asked and he laughed, amused by her antics.

“I might have something,” he said and brought her inside.

The two of them proceeded to shoot the shit over some liquor he had spent way too much money forever ago. The seller had given him an odd look before handing it over, daring him to actually drink it. Butterbile something. There was a year. After drinking some, he had quickly forgotten it; a perfect drink for two friends trying to forget (at least one of them was).

“Maker this is good!” Beverly exclaimed after they had a bit too much. “What the hell is it?”

“Butter-something something. And you believe in the Maker?” he asked, slurring his words.

“I’m a Seeker, an organization devoted to the Maker, is that so strange?”

He shrugged. “It’s not, I guess. I just didn’t think that you did. Besides, it’s an organization devoted to the Chantry, not the Maker.”

Beverly waved her hand back and forth and plopped on the bed next to him. “Pish-posh. Semantics. Why? Does that weird you out?”

“Guess I’ve never met an elf that actually believed in the Maker.”

“I’m sure you’ve met plenty, you’ve just never talked to them.” Fair enough. “And half-elf, remember? I know some people think that tagging the ‘oh I think of you as an elf’ or ‘oh I think of you as a human’ thing makes it better, but I’m pretty proud of who I am. My parents loved each other and I’m not going to deny one of them for convenience.”

“Okay,” he drawled. “I didn’t mean to offend.”

It was her turn to shrug. “You didn’t. I just think it’s weird for people to act like I need to be one or the other or that only elves face elf problems.”

“Ouch.”

“It’s true.”

He took another big gulp and passed the bottle over to her. “Nah. I don’t need it. I can’t get too fucked up or I won’t be able to walk home.”

Will gladly took it back and drank some more. “Suit yourself.” He saw her staring at with the biggest grin on her face. “I suppose you believe in the Creators.” He nodded. “Got a problem with that?”

Her grin widened, if that was even possible. “Nope. I believe in them too.”

He almost spit out the drink. “What?”

“I can believe in them both.”

Taken aback, he said, “I don’t think that’s how that works.”

“Faith is a funny thing. It’s so malleable. I believe in the Maker and the Creators; I’m allowed to do that.”

“How does that work then?”

“Well, for one, I send prayers to both Ghilan’nain and Andraste at the same shrine.”

“Wow,” he took another drink. “Does Jack know?”

Beverly laughed in his face, which he took slight offense to. “Of course he does. You think you can hide something like that from Jack?”

“And he doesn’t care?”

She sat up, bracing herself against the bed. “I mean, he thinks it’s weird, but he leaves me be. I already told you that faith is malleable. What we believe the world to be isn't black and white and it isn’t going to be obvious whether or not it’s true. That’s how faith works.”

Will laughed a little, but was still struck by her words, if for other reasons and a different context. “I think you might have already hit fucked up, Bev. Let’s send you home.”

After Beverly left, Will made sure to give each of the Mabari the attention that they deserved. Most of them were ecstatic to simply have him home, as they had been having to get used to not following him everywhere again. Sure, it had been a few months, but what does that really mean in the face of years? Only Winston was comfortable where he was, and Will noticed that he had been keeping the rest of the dogs in line. Once all of that was taken care of, he tried to rest. He had been sleeping a lot today, but it wasn’t restful.

Drifting off wasn’t hard. Will didn’t even need to take any herbs to put himself down. The sleep was largely dreamless, thanks to the alcohol, for which he was grateful. Dreams had been plaguing him far too often as of late, waking and sleeping, invading what little places of head space he could still claim as his own. Tonight, something else decided to invade, but it was not his head. It was his home.

Sometime during the middle of the night, Will heard barks and growls from the Mabari. They were usually a protective lot, so he wasn’t extraordinarily surprised, but his amusement and slight irritation quickly became fear when he realized just what they were looking at. All seven of them were staring at his bed, specifically under it. Any remaining drunkenness quickly sobered as his entire body tensed, blood pumping it quickly through and out of his system. Nothing happened for an extended moment as Will registered the last several times that something had been under a bed, before suddenly he was flying off it, diving among his Mabari to keep from getting too close.

On his hands and knees, he peered under, but instead of the monster pulling hapless victims under beds, he saw a girl. A sad, jaundiced, and frail young woman was huddled under the bed, backing into the far corner when she saw him looking. She was shaking with fear and Will glanced at her forehead to see the brand of the Chantry sun. She saw him looking and shook even more, quickly bringing an arm up to hide her face. Will tsked at the Mabari to get them to stop barking and, slowly, they did. The young woman, Georgia, visibly relaxed, but she was still strung like a stretched wire.

“I see you,” he whispered out. She pushed herself further in, trying to back up to the wall. Georgia was surrounding herself on all sides in order to keep safe. The only danger would be what she could see. For so long, she probably had no idea of self. This must have been terrifying and who knows what they did to her in the Circles. If the rumors are true, Tranquil faced abuses from Templars and Mages alike. Will held the small bit of trust being granted carefully and tried to help it expand. “Think of who you are, not what they made you into.”

She shivered, but some of her body relaxed in response. Kind words from a stranger unwound the muscles she left coiled.

She probably still thought that she was Tranquil or that she was dreaming. The young mage needed grounding, so Will took what tools he had been granted by Hannibal and extended them out to her, sharing in a small bond they had. “It’s midnight. You’re in Halamshiral, in Orlais. Your name is Georgia Madchen.”

Georgia flattened to the floor. “You are not alone,” Will said, reaching out with his hand. “We’re here together.”

“Am I alive?” Georgia asked, tears in her voice even though they weren’t on her face. She had cried them all away.

Gently, he put his hand at the edge of the bed, allowing her to meet him the rest of the way. She reached back, touching the back of his. They stayed there next to one another, until morning. Will eventually had to get up to get help, but he asked for just a few people that would help keep her safe. When they arrived, he brought her from under the bed and back into the land of the living.

Jack may have cautioned him against it, but as soon as he heard that Georgia was stabilized and with the healers, Will immediately went to see her. He needed to see how she was doing, especially after the ordeal that she just went through. Abigail had asked to go with him, and Will reluctantly agreed. Apparently, Hannibal and Alana had gotten the news while she was in the room. Part of him hoped that she wouldn’t be involving herself in death, but she seemed just as stubborn to go meet this girl as he was to see her.

“Will she be awake for visitors?” Abigail asked, and he shook his head.

“Probably not. Georgia was in pretty bad shape when we found her. We can still see her, though.” Abigail nodded in reply and they stepped over to the healer’s room. Seeing as Sutcliffe was dead, someone else was in there now. Once they entered, Will saw why this person was chosen. They were a lot older, and they certainly better understood how to make the room feel more welcoming. Instead of a single table lined with blankets, there were several cots in the room with dividers and places to put personal belongings. Georgia was laid out on one of the cots, skin slowly piecing itself back together as young woman tirelessly poured her magic into her.

They watched for a few minutes. Georgia had been freshly cleaned, so the dirt and oil that had covered her head to do was gone. She was still malnourished, healing couldn’t do anything about that, but her skin was slowly regaining color. Abigail tapped his shoulder. “She looks pretty.”

“She definitely looks a lot better than when I last saw her,” Will replied. The woman stopped her magic and wiped her brow before coming over to the both of them.

“You’re here to see Mademoiselle Madchen?”

“We are,” Abigail cut in before Will could say anything.

The healer nodded. “She’s still in pretty bad shape. A lot of people think that healing magic is the cure all, but-”

“But it’s often better for the body to let it heal naturally,” Will finished.

“We’ve done what we can at the moment. I’ll keep monitoring her situation, but we’re giving her medicine and liquid nourishment to get her health back on track.” With that, the healer left to go work with another patient, the path for both of them to approach Georgia open. Abigail is the one that took the chance and went first.

Will joined her and the two marveled at the young woman lying unconscious on the bed before them. Will had explained Georgia’s situation to Abigail before the two actually met, so the look of wonder in her eyes largely made sense. Part of him wondered if she sensed a kindred spirit, much like he had. For him, it was Georgia’s connection to reality and the disconnect with it. Perhaps Abigail saw a young woman that was the victim of circumstance, much like herself. He gave a sad smile as they sat by her bedside, thinking back to his experience beside Abigail’s, what felt like so long ago, half a year ago. Gently, he took her by the shoulder and they drew comfort in each other’s presence, allowing the peace to settle over them like a warm blanket.

It didn’t take long before both of them dozed off, the air of protection around them provided by the healer’s spirit keeping their dreams safe. They didn’t see it, but she smiled and basked in her spirit of Faith, hoping that she granted them all peaceful rest.

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In the dark of his Lordship’s study, Hannibal and Jack relaxed in front of the fireplace, drinking wine. The events of the last five days had pushed past them so fast that Jack had barely realized it was over. Bella had called him an old man on more than one occasion, but it only made him more aware of how fast that time was slipping away. Five days and two lives ended, one life saved, and several more irrevocably altered. Thus was the way of life, he supposed.

This young woman, Georgia Madchen, had only been found that morning due to her connection with Will. He was trying to be diplomatic about the whole thing with the young man, but the fact remains that the young woman had killed someone. Beth Le’Beau’s extended family were asking for closure or for justice. He had a feeling even they weren’t sure which. Georgia was not in her right mind when she killed Le’Beau, but did that matter? If she was never able to recover those memories of killing her, did she really? His thoughts were jumbled up. To make matters worse, both Will and young Mademoiselle Hobbs had been asking about the Madchen girl. He had warned them to stay away, but since when did Will do that when asked.

So, he went to his Lordship, hoping for aid in this matter and for someone to share his grief with. In the last few weeks, he had found himself going to Comte Lecter more and more, to

the point where he was considering the man a friend. Hannibal had been invaluable in keeping him sane and focused, allowing him to vent about Bella without causing problems for the two of them. Jack had a feeling that Bella went to him, too.

“There’s still a very high chance that she could die,” Hannibal pointed out. “Healing magic can do quite a bit, but there is still a lot that it can’t do. She could easily get infected again or die due to malnourishment or dehydration. An infection could happen in such a fashion that healing can’t reach it or it simply is too ingrained that all it can do is alleviate the aches.”

“I always thought that magic was so powerful because it could bring the Fade into this one and make it more malleable. Its ability to treat the world around like it’s a dream.”

“You’re not wrong, but it can’t cure the Blight and certain diseases. The more linked to the physical something is, the less power they have over it,” Hannibal replied. “That’s why healers are so prized in the first place; what they do is incredibly difficult.”

Jack sighed and took a sip of his red. “So will she recover?”

“There’s a chance she won’t. I know of the healer that they have working on her and she is very old and very accomplished. A Wynne, I believe, from the Fereldan Circle Tower. If anyone could heal young Georgia, it would be her.”

Jack nodded, allowing that to sink in. “What about her mental abilities? Will she have those back?”

Hannibal sighed and sniffed his wine. “Trauma is a funny thing Jack. She hasn’t been aware of her world for a decade and was only just released back here, straight into the wild. With proper treatment and work to help with her acclimation, she’ll be fine.” It was his turn to hesitate, almost as if he was worried about telling him something. So many people lately had been hesitant to speak with him. “I’m more worried about Will.”

“Not about Healer Sutcliffe,” Jack pointed out. It was a low blow, but all of this dancing had to end at some point.

It seemed that Hannibal didn’t take offense though. “I’m grieving him, but Will is alive. He wants an explanation that can make everything right again.”

Jack could sympathize. “Explanations? I’m looking for a few myself. When she wakes, I want to talk to her. Actually, I want to talk to her when she recovers.” He sipped his wine. “I wonder how much she’ll remember.”

Hannibal darted his eyes at them before returning his gaze to the fire, almost as if he felt guilty for his next words. “I sincerely hope for her sake that it isn’t much.”

Jack supposed that he could agree with the spirit of the statement, if not the actual words.

Falon'din enasal enaste

Chapter Summary

Reality starts to fall apart for Will, while Jack re-examines his own. Abigail makes a new friend.

Falon'din enasal enaste: A prayer for the dead. Roughly translates to 'May Falon'din bless you with his favor'.

Chapter Notes

08/31/24: Not yet edited

See the end of the chapter for more notes

High Seeker Frederick Chilton had been summoned to Halamshiral to make appeals before the Lord Seeker. The fall out from the reveal of what had happened to Abel Gideon was kept largely private between the Seekers and her Grace, the Divine, but it wouldn't be able to stay quiet much longer. Lord Seeker Kade Prurnell was conducting the appeal in Halamshiral to avoid the Divine in her seat. The man was very lucky that Divine Beatrix III was a decrypt old woman that wouldn't be around for much longer. If the rumor mill was correct, she already needed four attendants to carry her to the Sunburst Throne and frequently fell asleep in the middle of meetings. Or perhaps it was actually unlucky for him. Beatrix might give him a lighter sentence than his Lord Seeker.

When Hannibal heard that the High Seeker was going to be in town, he invited the man for dinner. It was important to keep one's potential enemies close, not that the man was remotely threatening. This had more to do with what his own curiosity about what was becoming of Abel Gideon rather than any actual interest in Chilton. If he wasn't so high profile, there was a chance that Hannibal would have eaten him already.

Of course, Hannibal had to inform Alana and Abigail about the goings-on in the home. Abigail, apparently, had heard enough about Chilton from Will to last a lifetime and excused herself from dinner, citing a new friend. That was an interesting development and would need to be explored more later. Alana had simply glared at him until he gave an excuse, something about trying to gauge more information about Abel Gideon to better serve him, and told him that she would be spending the evening with Beverly Katz. This was also a change. Naturally, he asked what exactly that meant and was told that Mademoiselle Katz was teaching Alana how to sword fight. This was something that he had not predicted, but might prove to be interesting nonetheless. Therefore, he had no real reason to object.

As soon as she was told, Nesiraya asked if she could bring in some trusted Friends of her own. The man had made a name by being pompous and upsetting his servants and the impoverished by grandstanding. Hannibal accepted the proposition as long as she looked into Abigail's new friend. Both agreed.

The actual dinner was fairly simple, something that physically pained him, but it functioned as a small bit of disrespect. What irritated him more was that the High Seeker was totally oblivious to the slight, which made the lack of presentation only frustrate him more. He could see several servants slinking in the background throughout dinner, some already brushing up against Chilton to plant objects and to steal from the man. The petty satisfaction it gave him softened the blow.

Once the Friends had largely disappeared and Nesiraya was taking care of seeing them off, Hannibal decided to broach the topic he had been hoping for. His study of Will's notes on Frederick's notes about Ben-Hassrath mind-breaking techniques gave him the opportunity to pry. Chilton was already predisposed to speak with him on the subject due to their previous conversations, so maybe he could understand more how the man managed to fumble his way into partial success of such a lofty goal.

It was strange, once he shared some of his research, Chilton was eager to share his own insights and seek his approval. After their previous encounter, Hannibal had strongly suspected that the man was jealous and in awe of him, but this kind of confirmation was amusing. At the moment, the High Seeker was trying to get more insight on Hannibal's knowledge of the subject while maintaining his innocence in the matter. The two men were sipping a brandy in Hannibal's study, the meal finished.

"I find that someone with a loose definition of who they are and doubts of their own identity are more susceptible to manipulation," Hannibal said after Chilton claimed that his work on Gideon was not the reason for the apprentice's death. "Abel Gideon comes from a tree of people that rarely doubt who they are; they are confident of their position in the world and what it means for them to be in its hierarchy."

"The only thing I did was try to appeal to his narcissism," Chilton replied, doing his best not to seem like he was stung by the remark.

"By convincing him that he was the Highwayman," declared Hannibal. It was common knowledge within the in-the-know circles that Chilton's attempt was a simulacrum at best. The Highwayman was still at large, and he was smirking at the table across from the man that had claimed to catch him.

Frederick stared into the fire wistfully. "If only I had been more curious about the workings and manipulation of the common mind," he said and, if Hannibal was another person, he would have rolled his eyes.

"I have no interest in understanding sheep. Only eating them," Hannibal replied, alluding to the fact that the meat basis of their meal had been 'sheep'.

"People are up-in-arms about the whole incident," the accused and guilty lamented. "They don't bother to ask my reasons or motives. They push guilt on me like a cloak."

Hannibal felt the need to point out, “You are not the only person that has ever been accused of making people kill.”

“And sometimes those accused have directly forced someone to kill,” Chilton reminded him. “Blood magic and demonic influence are things that exist after all, but I hardly can do something like that.” Frederick looked towards him, desperation in his eyes. “What would you do if you were in my position?”

Inwardly smirking, he replied, “Deny everything.” A plan began to form. It would require a little bit of work and he’d need to have Nesiraya move a few things to a different estate, but it could work. The real question was which one; Halamshiral was not the place that would accomplish his goals.

“I think the worst part about this is the betrayal,” the High Seeker said. It occurred to Hannibal that the man had been talking, but he had tuned him out. Hannibal wondered what the other human meant by betrayal and nodded for him to continue. He looked hesitant for a moment, before deciding to continue regardless of misgivings. “I’m not speaking with the Lord Seeker as a punishment for doing this in the first place. I’m being reprimanded for not controlling the situation and getting caught.” It was as Alana had suspected; Chilton’s behavior was sanctioned. “I wasn’t supposed to convince him that he was the Highwayman, I’ll admit to that, but I was supposed to be testing out Ben-Hassrath methods to change his personality.”

“Change his personality?”

Chilton thought for a moment. “Well, break it down I suppose.”

“As subtle as the Ben-Hassrath can be sometimes, the methods they employ for breaking the mind are rarely subtle,” Hannibal said.

“Disorientation. Poison. Sensory deprivation. Starving. Pain. Lack of Sleep. And those are just some of the techniques.”

“You were trying too hard.”

Chilton barked out a laugh. “Well it wasn’t like I was just doing it for fun. Changing an entire personality is a lot of work; I wasn’t trying for minor alterations.” Oh how the tides change when a person wants to assure someone else of another’s guilt. The poor High Seeker had just admitted to his guilt in front of Hannibal to pass the blame onto his superior.

“That’s why the Ben-Hassrath usually do minor changes to specific aspects to discourage rebellion. Anyone that requires that kind of force usually are left as drones. You have to change them slightly or destroy them completely,” was what Hannibal said, and for once he meant it. The Qunari did not waste, and that occasionally meant prisoners that became husks of what they once were.

Frederick paled though. Hannibal decided to keep pushing. “What’s more is that if the methods are pointed out, it becomes more difficult to continue the project. It’s still possible, but less effective.”

“And Gideon’s murder led to events that revealed some of what was going on,” Frederick concluded.

“I am curious what had your Lord Seeker so busy that she required the use of a warhammer when someone should be using a dagger.”

Frederick shook his head, “I cannot tell you, Comte Lecter. Even if I get taken off of this project, the Lord Seeker would have my head for speaking about it.”

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Every moment awake was another moment lost. Gone were the days where he could meet gentler spirits in his dreams. In fact, if he could meet anything, spirit or demon, that wasn’t the decaying face of Garrett Hobbs, Will would be grateful. Then he would be able to tell if it was an actual dream or a distortion of his reality.

Another night of him watching the embers on the fire go out, one by one, while his Mabari huddled near the hearth for warmth. He would get a few seconds of fitful sleep and then awaken again only to see a single place where the flame had diminished. Will idly wondered what would happen when they all finally went out. A couple of the Mabari were seated at the edge of his bed, whimpering for some unknown reason; he gave them a few neck scratches and tried to send them off to sleep. If he got up now, then he wouldn’t be able to return for the rest of the night.

The heavy blanket of exhaustion washed over him again and he felt every limb go lax. He dropped off, sweating despite the growing cold in the room. Even in his sleep, he could feel the liquid slide down his body, soaking into the sheets below. A huff fell over his brow and he clenched his eyes shut harder. Trapped between waking and dreaming, he kept his eyes closed for fear of what he would see if he opened them. Another labored breath moistened his face and drops collected around the creases of his eyes. Will fought the urge to wipe them away, too worried that movement would alert the creature to his wakefulness (little as it was).

More droplets fell on his face and dripped down his cheeks. Will waited until he couldn’t before opening his eyes, and saw nothing. As he went to wipe off the liquid, he found that he couldn’t move his limbs. Arms and legs were stock still against the mattress, refusing to even twitch. Panic began to build as he fought against the invisible grip; he was hyperventilating. Something that felt like water began pooling were his body caused the bedding to dip, the ceiling melting away and splashing more on his face.

The pool around him began to rise up around him and he sunk deeper, unable to jump out of bed and free himself. The water licked at the edges of his cheeks and swallowed his mouth. Only his nose peeked out, but that wasn’t for much longer. He sunk as the water rose, unnaturally cool. Then, he dissipated, leaking off the sides of his bed when the pool overflowed.

Will woke with a start, sitting up quickly and searching the room with heavy breaths. The dogs surrounded his bed and all of his hounds were nudging up against it. Winston leaped on top and snuggled into his side, despite the fact that he was drenched in sweat. The Mabari

received a few idle scratches as Will listened to the rain going outside and wondered why that nightmare felt so real.

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Abigail took a deep breath in and stared at the door to healer's ward of Halamshiral's small version of the Circle. Inside was a young woman that was alone in the world, whereas she had been lucky enough to receive a group of people suddenly invested in her well-being. The only ones that had been visiting this girl were she and Will. A bird had sent a message to her that Georgia Madchen had woken up. It was from Will, who was on his own way to visit her. He told her that he had informed the staff that she would be coming and gave permission for her to be there, for which she was grateful.

The mages and Templars here required better security. All she had to say was that she was Abigail Hobbs and they immediately began leading her to the young girl's room, no verification necessary. They were in Halamshiral; did they think that no bard or assassin from the House of Repose could possibly have a target here? Were the Templars here really so worried about the mages that they neglected outside or non-magical threats?

People like that, she would never understand.

When she arrived at the healer's room, Will was already there. The elf looked up at her with a smile and gestured for her to get closer, to intrude on their moment. Briefly, Abigail felt a stab of jealousy for how quick Will seemed to warm up to this young woman, but she tried to push it away. During the past several nights where they sat vigil, Will explained that he felt a kinship with Georgia; they were very similar in a lot of ways. It wasn't the same relationship he had with her at all. The two of them were bonded by shared tragedy. There was still a part of her that craved Will's affection and the strange pedestal that he had put her on, but their watch had allowed them to understand each other a bit better.

Besides, she would never be innocent to him again. It was too late for that. For now, all she could do was keep it so that he didn't realize what else she had done.

Georgia wasn't just like Will. The young woman was a lot like her too. The more that Will had talked about her situation, Abigail had made her own connection to their self-imposed charge. She lived in fear or had lived in fear and had done something not of her own volition that had resulted in someone's death… more than one someone's. Maybe, there was only a chance but maybe, Abigail had found someone that she could talk to about her own struggles.

The non-mage in the room went to join them and stood side-by-side with Will. "Hello, Georgia," she greeted. "I'm Abigail."

The young woman looked much improved: her skin growing whole, body and hair freshly walked, and the sickly, yellowish pallor was almost gone. Georgia smiled and brushed still healing fingers through her hair, apparently a little self-conscious. "Well you already know my name," she replied in turn, voice hoarse from disuse. "So I guess it's nice to finally meet you."

"Abigail is the one I was telling you about," Will chimed in.

“Good to know that I have friends besides you.”

Friends? They barely knew each other. Clearly her thoughts must have shown on her face, because the next thing that Georgia said was: “Not many people would stay beside a murderer’s bedside.” Will made a face, while Abigail was struck by the phrasing. Not many people would, no, but Will certainly seemed to have a habit of it. “Georgia, you weren’t aware of what was going on and thought it was a dream.”

Whatever was left of the smile on the other girl’s face waned and then disappeared. “Murder is still murder, regardless of whether or not I knew what was happening. The only thing they are trying to figure out is where I should go because of it.”

“Where you should go?” Abigail asked and both of them seemed about to answer before a messenger peeked their head into the room.

“Will? I’m looking for Will?” When the elf indicated his identity was indeed Will, the messenger continued, “Jack Crawford told me to get you. He said it was urgent.”

Will sighed and shrugged at the two of them regretfully. “I’ll see you both soon,” and then he left.

Eyebrows furrowed, Georgia inquired, “Does that happen a lot?”

“Him called away by Seeker Jack Crawford? Yes.”

“I don’t know if I like this Jack Crawford guy. He seems like a jerk.”

Abigail laughed, earlier question forgotten. “You have no idea!” Then, she immediately began telling Georgia about different awkward moments when Will was called, some of which she had heard from her guardians and a couple she blatantly made up. Georgia started telling her funny stories from her time in the Circle. Apparently, being Tranquil meant that most people ignored you, which was sad, but it allowed for her to be a fly on the wall in some truly spectacular moments. Abigail could tell that she was skirting around some things to keep from talking about some more horrifying things, but they were content for the moment. The earlier tension had dissipated, but was not forgotten by either girl.

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Will took in the violence before him and closed his eyes. He had already taken his herbs for this and it wasn’t long before he drifted off to sleep.

The world around him was fading backward, the Realm of Dreams eking back time for this single moment that he needed. He was sitting in the back of the cart, closed in by the bars and in irons. There was a driver at the front and two Seeker patrolling the sides. One was inside with him, watching him from across the bed of the wagon. They were keeping a vigilant guard, eyes never wavering; he needed them not to, just for a moment. Their first mistake was not attaching his chains to something.

Of course, he had learned to slip from manacles and chains before this one was probably born. For a second, he shifted his hands, watching as the guard glanced at them before looking back up at him. He chatted, incessantly, doing his best to draw a slight bit of ire, which began to work after a moment: the second mistake. His guard's eyes twitched with irritation at the audacity of their prisoner, and just when they leaned over to ask to switch with one of the Seekers walking outside, he struck. It wasn't hard to dislocate his thumb and slip the hand through, so he leapt at the one across from him. It was far too easy to slide his chains around the novice's neck and hold fast while his hand yanked the sword from its sheath and slit the young man's throat.

The driver began scrambling for their weapons, trying to string their crossbow. One of the Seeker's outside unlocked the door so they could get their dying comrade out. He lunged at them, blade in hand, catching the young person off-guard. It had been years since he actively engaged in swordplay, but the stances and movements came back to him in moments. Absently, he heard the driver fumbling around to get outside of the cart, bolts at the ready. Quick work. He needed to make quick work.

Will climbed out of the cart where they had held Abel Gideon a few hours ago. Honestly, the elf hadn't expected for the ex-Seeker to become relevant again. After years of rotting away beneath the Bastion d'Argent, it seemed like he had lost any fire he might have had for all but one final hurrah. Apparently, something changed and had done so dramatically, if he was ready and willing to react with such destruction. The whole mess didn't even have the decency to feel personal; the murderer was just trying to deal with those in the way of accomplishing his goal. What did involve emotion came after their deaths.

Littering the ground were the bodies of the guards from his transport. All of their armor was removed and scattered around the mangled bodies, organs tied to trees and strung up with veins. There was a kind of meticulousness in the presentation before him that he hadn't felt in the dredges of the Fade. With two feet on the ground and his stomach in his chest, Will was approached by Jack. "Does Abel Gideon still believe that he's the Highwayman?"

Will looked out to the careful control on display and remembered the wildness in the cart. "Abel Gideon is having a difference of opinion about who he is." He pointed to the stretches of blood and the tableau. "Whoever was responsible for the situation in the cart was not in the same state of mind when they did this."

Beverly joined from the trees, dropping down next to them after observing the field from a high branch. "I counted out the uniforms; it seems like we're missing a couple of weapons and a set of armor. He must've taken it with him."

"Useful for later, but I think what he didn't take is more important," Will said, gesturing to a nearby bundle of innards. He felt rather than saw Beverly acknowledge his statement, carefully not looking at her.

"Seems like he had a good time with it," she snarked. "Even tied little bows with some of the veins."

"This is strange," Brian said and Jimmy hovered behind him. "You guys should come here!" the half-dwarf called. The group approached.

“I noticed that all of the noses on our victims seem to have been damaged. A lot of it looks like it occurred perimortem.” Will raised an eyebrow at Brian. “At or around the time of death,” the alchemist explained. “There’s some pretty severe bruising and a little bleeding which looks more like it was gravity at work. A few of them have actual bleeding, so the blood was still circulating while he damaged it and their bruises are this dark red color.” He pointed to one nose that looked crushed and had his finger follow up a line of red layered underneath the skin that went up the face. “It looks like he pushed something inside all the way up to the skull cavity.”

“Is it possible that he damaged the brain?” Will asked.

“Almost definitely.”

Jimmy snorted, “What happened to ‘I don’t know bodies’?”

Brian growled and shot back, “I got curious, okay? Talked with a few people including Comte Lecter.”

Will walked away as he heard Jimmy say, “What does Comte Lecter know about dead bodies?”

“He’s Nevarran, okay? Apparently he had a couple of Mortalitasi friends and they think weird shit about the dead.”

“Jack,” Will said as he approached the contemplative older man. “The Highwayman wouldn’t have left the organs behind.”

The Seeker raised an eyebrow, “I think it’s been pretty well established that Abel Gideon is not the Highwayman.”

Beverly followed closely behind, “I found a trail leading through the woods. They look like armored boots and there’s only one pair leading away from the scene.”

“Fresh?”

“Very.”

Jack nodded, “Where are they going?”

Shrugging, Beverly replied, “Apparently into Halamshiral.”

It surprised them that Chilton was willing to meet up with them. Lord Seeker Prurnell had been delayed for a while longer, so the High Seeker was required to remain in the city until something could be done, but that did not mean that he had to agree to this discussion. Will was confused why the man would allow himself to even court being reprimanded by those he

considered himself the better of, but there was a chance that the man saw no fault with himself.

After they spoke with him and revealed what had happened with Gideon, Frederick had said, “I suppose this is my fault then?”

So it was option two. Jack and the rest of the squad were all in the office, letting Jack lead the discussion. It was his horse, so to speak. That didn’t mean that Will didn’t want to put in a few choice words, but he was keeping his mouth shut… for now. Jack had his hands full without Will adding to it. “This circumstance does mean that your ‘conversation’ with our Lord Seeker must be delayed while the situation is contained. He is also a key bit of evidence for your missteps.”

Chilton scoffed, “Next you’ll be accusing me of arranging his escape.”

Jack gave a slow blink and spoke just as slowly, “Nobody is making that accusation.”

“Yet,” added Beverly. Jack side-eyed her, but didn’t say anything else.

“If we’re assigning blame, then your little group should get their fair share, especially you,” the High Seeker said, pointing out Will.

“Me?” came the incredulous reply. Will was only on this side of not yelling at the man for his idiocy.

“Yes, you,” Frederick snarled. “You told him that I was manipulating him, planted that suggestion in there. That’s why he was trying to escape after all. Your ‘difference of opinion’ that you spoke of.”

“We have evidence,” Will snarled back.

“What evidence?” asked Frederick, impatience and anger rising. “How did you come by it? Who gave it to you?” When no one said anything, but Beverly glanced at Will. “That’s what I thought. Gathering evidence to support your own claims with no one to corroborate it does not help you, mage.”

Jack broke in, “For the sake of argument, let’s say that you were doing things that you weren’t allowed.” The smaller man with higher stature in the organization started to protest, but Jack cut him off. “For the sake of the argument,” he emphasized. “Why would he be doing this?”

“Everything I did was discussed beforehand,” Frederick defended. “By both Gideon and the Lord Seeker. Former Seeker Gideon said that he understood my cause, but I didn’t drive him insane.”

“What did?” Brian asked when it didn’t look like he was going to continue.

Chilton’s face was filled with such conviction that Will almost thought that he was being honest. There was still an undercurrent of sliminess to him that upset his stomach. “Seeker Gideon wasn’t insane when he began the massacre of the Ghislain Circle; it was the massacre

that drove him insane. The sheer amount of death drove him to forget what he was. I reminded him that he was already a murderer."

Will's face twisted and he stepped forward, ignoring Beverly's attempt to hold him back. "Abel Gideon is not the Highwayman although he may have thought he was under your supervision, High Seeker," he spat out. The last words were said almost more as a curse.

"It doesn't right now whether or not Gideon is the Highwayman," Jack said, although Will knew that the man agreed with him. "What matters is that he is out and will most likely kill again. The sooner we find him, the better off we'll be. Every moment he is gone is a moment where someone else could die."

"I hope he doesn't, for your sake," Chilton said, smirking at the rest of them. Will wanted to punch him in the nose. "I can't imagine how you'd sleep with that on your shoulders."

Beverly made an affronted noise and Jimmy scoffed, "How did you after Gideon killed your apprentice?"

"We thought he was in his cell. The guard left for just a few moments on a restroom break that couldn't wait. He should never have been able to get to the armory and she was surrounded by weapons. I am less responsible for her death than the guard's small bladder and her lack of vigilance."

A chorus of protests rose from the squad, who were all angry at the affront that was High Seeker Frederick Chilton. The defendant started yelling back about his own innocence. Will was swept away in the tide of noise, a gradual ringing in his ears increased until it became a low buzz. The noise increased and grew louder and louder until it culminated in a yelled, "Quiet!"

Everyone and everything stopped. Jack was standing up, cowing the rest of them with his presence. Punctuating every word, he asked, "What does Gideon want?"

Chilton swallowed, looking at bit like he wanted to shrink from sight. "The last thing he told me was that he was going to tell everyone that he was the Highwayman."

Immediately after the meeting with the High Seeker, Jack summoned the squad together and a couple of the Seekers that had travelled with Chilton. There weren't any other Seekers in the immediate area, so the job of hunting one of their own fell to them; although they agreed that they shouldn't be doing this entirely on their own. When Will asked about his presence at the meeting, Jack simply raised his eyebrows and declared him an honorary member of the Seekers of Truth. He was torn between feeling honored and another nameless feeling that bordered on irritation.

They gathered in the Guard-Captain's office before him along with a few highly skilled guards recommended by the Guard-Captain once the situation was explained. There was some worry and talk about panic in the city and keeping the meeting private, so the Guard-Captain was doing their best to keep the rest of the barracks away and on-duty. Jack was standing behind the desk with a large map of the city and the surrounding area on it.

He turned towards the group of guards before addressing the rest of them. “You all have specifically chosen due to your skill and discretion. Do not disappoint.” Suddenly, the Senior Seeker produced an artist’s rendition of Gideon and placed it next to the map. “Our quarry is Abel Gideon, as seen in this drawing, a former Seeker of Truth. He was previously imprisoned in the Bastion d’Argent for the massacre of the Ghislain Circle of Magi, both of the mages and the Templars stationed there. Currently he is claiming that he was also the infamous murderer known as the Highwayman.” The guards in the room began murmuring amongst themselves, either disturbed or excited by the news.

Will was doing his best to keep the Seekers as a buffer between himself and the guards (wasn’t that a first), and most of them didn’t seem bothered by it. Brian, of course, had a problem with it, but stopped complaining after a few stern looks from Beverly and Jimmy. He stood against the wall in the corner of the room, a couple of yards away from even them, sweating and trying to hold in his nausea. For the most part, he was paying more attention to the reactions of the temporary recruits and less to what Jack was saying. The words came filtered through the blood pounding in his ears, which drowned out his own breathing.

“He escape happened this morning not far from Halamshiral when he was being transported for a hearing of a fellow Seeker.” Jack glared slightly at the guards, silently telling them that this information was not to be shared with anyone. Will could’ve sworn he saw the legs of one of them tremble a little. “In the process, he killed the three Seekers transporting him.” Jack was getting progressively louder and, combined with the flaring heat from the nearby sconce, was giving him a pulsing and exceedingly painful headache. “He is armed and dangerous.”

Will rubbed some of the sweat from his brow and blinked a few times to concentrate. “He could not have gotten far on foot, but there is always the chance that he could get a horse. However, we have reason to believe that Gideon is staying in the area.”

After one of his blinks, Will had to rub his eyes as well. Growing from the walls were alabaster halla horns, twisting and curving. The spiraled out a couple of feet, intertwining with other horns nearby. They started to snake around him, the bends becoming a cage that kept him against the wall, brushing his sides and scratching his head.

He heard a distant echo that sounded like Jack’s voice. The man turned to face him. “Imprisoned at the Bastion d’Argent,” was reiterated, but the voice was reverberating and surrounding him. Will glanced around and saw that no one else was in the room. It was just him and Jack. The antlers meandered sinuously around Jack was well, but they did not touch him. “You are armed and you are dangerous.”

Will tried not to throw up as the pain grew, spreading from his head down his neck and shoulders, before resting in his body as a whole. “What kind of crazy are you?” Jack yelled, and the sounded pounded against the bone arena of his skull.

The elf tried to form a protest, but the antlers coiled around his face. “You killed!” continued Jack and Will didn’t even have the heart to protest.

The man advanced until he was only a couple of steps away from Will. “You will kill again.”

When Will blinked, Jack was on the other side of the room, speaking with the guards away from the rest of the Seekers, who were picking up the demonstration material. He leaned all his weight against the wall and took a few deep breaths to re-center himself. Jack glanced his way and gave him a quizzical look, still trying to give the guards his attention. Will nodded and tried to look as coherent as possible, despite the fact that the word still flowed in upsetting ways around him.

A part of him thought it was telling that the first thing he did after the meeting was go straight to Hannibal. It was only after he was in front of the Comte's suite that Will considered the human might be busy doing basically anything else. He was lucky that the noble opened the door and quickly welcomed him in. The journey left him suddenly enervated and his legs were fleeing out from under him. Hannibal rushed the young elf quickly to one of the plusher chairs in the study and allowed the man some comfort for a few moments before he surely would begin his interrogation.

The harsh questioning that Will expected from the man never came. Instead, his Lordship asked, "Are you well, Will? It has been a very long time since you simply turned up like this, at least a month."

"I'm-" Will paused. The Comte already knew a good portion of what was going on and didn't judge him, nor did he think that Will was barely holding it together on the edge of possession. He surely had heard more and crazier from Will by this point; what was the harm in another moment of weakness and fear. Perhaps Hannibal could even shed some light on his thought process or anything that the malady of the mind could be doing to him. Something poked inside his skull, but Will ignored it, despite its persistence.

"I believe I may have seen another thing that wasn't there."

"A hallucination?"

Will shrugged, "I suppose you could argue that. I believe that at least some of them are messages and not figments of my imagination."

"Except that the Creators and the Maker are as absent as always, unless Fen'Harel would bother to send you messages." Will contemplated the comment for a moment. He had considered it, yes. "They've abandoned their creations to their fates."

"I thought you were a man of faith, your Lordship," Will said more than asked. Hannibal only smiled.

"I am, but I do not see the Maker as a loving yet disappointed parental figure that left to give the world space." The words were said so flatly and without malice despite the heresy that lurked behind them. Still, it's not like Will was going to tell anyone. If for no other reason then no one would believe him. "Message or not, what did you see?"

Will swallowed and his eyes darted away from the Comte's. "A thicket of halla antlers weaving through the room. Everything faded so that all I could hear was my heartbeat and

breathing. The world was dim."

Hannibal wavered for a moment before he spoke, "I did some research and found cases where people are in a similar condition as you. They experienced sleep disruptions, sleepwalking, episodes of hallucinations, memory loss…"

"Memory loss?" Will asked, unsure if his loss of time could be described as such, but willing to take something that wasn't possession.

"Yes. Also, personality changes."

Will blinked, stalled by the magnitude of those simple words. "Has my personality changed?"

Hannibal was not going to let him put the burden of this question on his Lordship. "Do you think it's changed?"

Did he? It felt like so much of the time his experiences in the Fade were bleeding into him, inking them into his skin and beyond. Every new crime and every new killer were staining him. And, of course, there was always Garrett Hobbs. "I don't know," Will said finally. "Who I am isn't so clear anymore; sometimes I'm sure that I have been becoming someone different for a while." He scrubbed his hands across his face, feeling like he was choking up inside. A strange feeling welled up in his gut; it felt like the anticipation of sobbing, the brink of breaking down. He held it back inside him, but it came out in his voice. "I feel like somebody else."

Hannibal asked him, "Whom do you feel like?" The tone was pruned and picked of inflection; Will could hear the manifested will to sound neutral. It was something that he appreciated about Hannibl, his efforts to prevent displaying any sort of judgement. The question was a difficult one but bereft of expectation.

"I don't-" Will tried, but couldn't find any more words. "I feel lost. I've even been calling to Ghilan'nain for help at this point. I could use direction, any at all, to try and make the world feel real again. Everything is a dream and I can't find my way out."

"Is that what you fear most?" Hannibal asked, glancing at him curiously.

Will shook his head. "At this point? I fear not knowing who I am, not being me anymore." He shuffled anxiously in his seat, remembering what Georgia went through as a Tranquil. The world submerged away with no emotions or identity to direct your goals or simple day to day activities. She said it felt like a dream, but it sounded like a nightmare. "That's what Georgia went through. That's what Gideon is afraid of. Chilton got into his head and twisted it around until there was nothing he recognized anymore, even his old self."

"I imagine Abel Gideon wishes to find the Highwayman, yes?" Will nodded. "He wants a gauge to tell him who he is and who he isn't." Hannibal leaned forward and placed a hand on Will's shoulder, gentle but it was still a weight to hold him there. "You have me."

Will allowed for him to stay there a moment longer, before he decided that he needed to go home. Hannibal was gentle letting him out and let him leave without protest, for which Will

was grateful. Staying in the Winter Palace wasn't what he thought of as comfortable. The beds felt too much like bitterness. Not that he was going to get any actual at his little shack, but at least he could relax with the dogs and wait it out until morning.

Going back to the barracks after the debacle the day before left a sick feeling in his stomach. It squirmed within him and fought against his gag reflex, but there was nothing vomited up, not even bile. Just Will choking on empty air. He took to doing those breathing exercises, but they only made him aware of how much he was inhaling into his body and the method of expulsion.

The help from Hannibal the night before helped a little. It put some things into perspective at least. His situation was still an absolute nightmare, but now he knew why. There was a running theme of the world becoming less real and that was becoming more of an issue. At the moment, Will was reasonably sure that he was awake, but there was no guarantee. If he wasn't, then he had to be on guard for demons, and it was hard to do that when waking and dreaming felt the same.

Right now was one such instance. On one of the repurposed storage tables laid the bodies of the three Gideon victims. There were simple clothes left to preserve their modesty, which Will would never understand. They're dead. Why worry about a corpse's propriety? Beverly, Brian, and Jimmy were examining them; Beverly and Jimmy were checking belongings and marks of death, and Brian was working with something alchemical in the corner. Apparently he had a new experiment that he had been anticipating trying out. It was very involved and was supposed to help the user identify magical and non-magical auras.

His friend glanced up from Gdeon's bags and waved him over. Will followed to her station, despite himself, but the journey was only about two feet, so it wasn't very impressive. "I've been looking through this, but I haven't found any form of correspondence, manifesto, or other bit of writing that may have triggered this kind of reaction." She pulled out what little Gideon had owned, a simple book of Threnodies, a journal, and small bits of folded parchment. "I've been working on this shit all morning."

"You won't find anything," Will barked out and she laughed.

"Wish I had known that earlier. Would've saved me a lot of time." Will noticed Brian giving him a strange look and nodded in his vague direction.

"I mean it. Whatever is going on with him, it is in his head. Physical evidence wouldn't help him, so it won't help us."

"Alright, alright," Beverly said, not seeming to enjoy the way his tone was rising. Will looked to the side to avoid making eye contact. His faux pas behavior-wise was making him self-conscious. That's when he saw the water pooling from the nearby wall and sloshing around his feet. It was streaming down the sides in great amounts. He could hear someone talking, but it was like he was under the water, everything muffled and slow. Vague noises made up his world. His eyes followed the stream and Will looked up.

All three of them were gesturing at the heads of the bodies, talking heatedly, but not arguing. Will's eyes raked over each of them, trying to know if they were witnessing what he was. A

couple of times, they glanced in his direction, but none of them actually took a second glance or checked in with him, so the water probably wasn't real. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, still feeling the droplets of water hit the side of his shoes. After a moment, the mage elected to open them and the hallucination was no longer there.

Like a thunderclap, the voices were back in focus. "Why remove all of the other organs from the victim's bodies and leave them in tact, but scramble their brains?" Jack asked and Will was taken aback. He didn't even notice the man come in, let alone him join in on the conversation. The Senior Seeker was usually very difficult to ignore, and that realization lodged a pit in Will's stomach. The elf made a concentrated effort to swallow metaphorical (or not so metaphorical) bile down and examine the bodies in front of them.

"That's what we all did to him," he concluded, much to the confusion of everyone else in the room.

"We did what?" asked Jack.

"The Seekers as an organization destroyed who Gideon was," Will pointed out. "He was probably a noble, second son so that he couldn't inherit. He spent years with the Seekers until he broke and simply began killing his charges. Then, they take him and wreck his mind, claiming it was for the good of the organization." Jack remained silent, eyes fixed on Will. "The organs were to prove to himself that he wasn't the Highwayman. The brains were a warning to everyone that ever had a hand in the way his brain is today that he is coming for them."

"We're all targets then," Beverly said.

"That includes you, Will," Jack declared, looking to the younger man. "You may not be a Seeker officially, but he associates you with us and you did speak with him about his state of mind directly."

Will whispered, "I know." The awareness of his potential hand in this did not escape him.

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Like he did during most decisions where he was conflicted thanks to the potential ramifications of any of them, the first thing Jack did was go to Bella. His love had always had an extremely level head about these matters and she was definitely the wisest person he had ever met. That could be infuriating sometimes, when he wished to be less than rational, but ultimately she was usually right. Not always, but usually.

They had just finished dining together, something they had been trying to do more of lately. Their few encounters with Comte Lecter had shown them that a small meal between people facilitates conversation and intimacy. So far it had worked. Still, neither of them could cook, so they often had to rely on the servants of the Winter Palace. Luckily, the Empress's favor had earned them a reliable staff. Jack was positive that they worked for Briala, but, as far as Bella knew, they had yet to upset the Empress. Neither of them were going to be blackmailed (yet) or killed in their sleep (most likely).

Bella was quick to express her amusement as his paranoia, but she of all people knew how shifty the Orlesian court was. His worry was warranted (which she did acknowledge). Right now, however, death was going to come from a very different source. Of course he had to explain what was going on with Gideon! They were married and she had a right to know when her husband was in danger. Granted the job itself was dangerous; they had accepted the fact that he could die any day long ago.

She gently rubbed the width of his shoulders. “People target Seekers all the time. It’s just usually in face-to-face combat,” he said and she nodded sagely. She had a look of gentle amusement and deep concern.

“Clearly this is bothering you, but not for that reason,” Bella prompted.

“You know I can take care of myself.”

“You most certainly can.” She squeezed the muscles in his upper arms and he gingerly swatted at her.

“The team has dealt with people targeting us before and we are all veterans of combat, even Brian.”

Whatever amusement she was finding was wiped up. “Where are you going with this, Jack?”

Jack sighed and they leaned together, the pressing of each other’s weight assuring of their life and their love. “All of us are experienced in combat, even against fellow Seekers, except for Will.”

“Oh.” She nodded against him.

“I talked with him. Garrett Hobbs was the first time that he had even killed another person. He had never had to kill bandits or raiders. Sure, he’s fought demons, but low powered ones. He once told me that if you have to raise your staff against a demon, more than likely you’ll lose.” They bundled together against the newfound chill. “Seekers have special abilities besides the standard ‘dispel and drain magic’ that we use against mages, some which are more dangerous than most. Abel Gideon had one of the more dangerous ones, which is why he could go on a one man killing spree through an entire Circle.”

“What, exactly, can he do?”

“He can make the lyrium in a person’s blood feel like it’s boiling. Seekers don’t take lyrium, but Templars have to and mages naturally seem to have it. The last time I had him meet Gideon I made sure he hadn’t been drinking any lyrium, which would help at least a little, but I didn’t tell him about Gideon’s abilities.”

“Jack!” she chastised, and he knew that she was right.

“I know! I just didn’t want him scared. The only problem is that if he goes up in combat against Gideon, Will won’t stand a chance… I want to put him under guard.”

“Jack,” she replied. “He’s going to hate that.”

“I know,” he agreed. “He doesn’t like me getting into his business as is and I don’t want to disrespect his autonomy in this, but I need to keep him safe.”

Bella sat back and looked at him, “How are you going to break the news to him?”

Jack sighed. “I can’t just say ‘we’re keeping you under guard now’. I suppose I’ll explain to him about Gideon and hope for the best.”

Husband and wife kissed lightly. “Try and be careful.”

“I’ll tell him tomorrow.”

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The ringing of a dull sword slamming against a shield filled the courtyard as Alana made another swipe for Beverly as the more experienced warrior blocked at just the right moment. The half-elf quickly adjusted her footing for an even weight distribution and shoved the blade back, unbalancing Alana. The brunette started to topple over, but turned the disadvantage into an advantage as her rebalancing allowed her to sidestep the Seeker’s swipe.

Beverly grinned widely and jabbed once more, Alana making a swift parry that crossed her body to protect her core. A quick turn of the blade and the brunette slapped the half-elf in the side with its flat, the noise of metal sliding across metal filling her ears. The other woman quickly stepped around Alana and dropped the shield entirely, pulling another sword from its sheath. Her next several hits left Alana sweating and struggling for breath as she hurried to place her own shield in the way of each one.

They danced around the courtyard; Beverly was working not to accidentally riposte her charge in the heat of a practice battle, and Alana was trying to keep up her trainer’s demanding pace. It quickly culminated when the former Sister saw an opening in the Seeker’s defense. When the half-elf brought both swords down for a blow intended to knock her prone, instead Alana brought up her shield and pushed them off, causing Beverly to stagger. Before she could get her footing back, Alana charged, shield first, and toppled her. She had to move quickly before her opponent could roll away, So Lady Bloom skidded forward to position the tip of her sword at Beverly’s throat and her shield in place so that any attempts to knock the blade away would be expediently countered.

They stared at each other for a moment, neither moving, before Beverly threw her head back into the dirt and laughed. It was full bodied and caused the woman to move slightly, so Alana sheathed the blade before she hurt the other woman in a less ‘practice’ way. “Doing good, ‘Lana,” she said and rolled up from the ground.

“Lana?” the former Sister asked.

“Is that okay?”

Alana smirked, “Only if I get to call you Bev.”

The Bev in question appeared absolutely delighted by the prospect, so it probably wasn't as much of an imposition as Alana had meant it to be. "Please do!" She dusted off her leathers, making sure to avoid catching her hands on the studs. "You'll be getting to call me that a lot more soon."

"I will?"

Beverly shrugged. "Honestly? At this point you're better at fighting than several initiates I can think of and you already have early religious training. You're in your mid-twenties, so the rest of it which helps a lot with the fact that they didn't get you before or around the time you turned sixteen."

"Did they get you around that time?"

"Yeah. I was trying to pickpocket Jack."

Alana guffawed, holding her stomach beneath the training armor. It was far too easy to imagine a young Beverly pickpocketing Jack and the man recruiting her on the spot.

"It's a good thing that we're getting you too," Beverly continued, not seeming to consider the possibility that Jack would refuse. "We're in desperate need for new blood right now."

It took a moment for Alana to calm, but Beverly's comment was sobering. "The Seekers are?"

The other woman nodded, "We've had some murders. Abel Gideon got out and is targeting Seekers or at least those that said something to him about his mind during his incarceration. Most of whom were Seekers."

"Most of whom?"

Beverly grimaced and hesitated for a moment. "Well, there was one other person that talked to Gideon."

"Who? Don't we need to let them know and give them protection."

"Will, Alana. The person was Will."

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Will was more than a little surprised to see Alana at his home the next morning. The Mabari had alerted him to her presence only after she walked up to the door, leaving him a scant few moments to clad himself and properly prepare for a visitor. This time, she already was hiding the tips of her ears in her hair and had made a significant effort to dress down for the occasion. Her clothes were very plain (and he meant that in only the most flattering way), clearly having taken great pains to be inconspicuous. He was honestly surprised that she managed to stay as dry as she did, considering the light rain that had been slowly turning into slush outside.

“Will. Can I come in?” she greeted tersely and he allowed her inside, more than a little anticipatory about whatever she was going to say.

He offered her some tea, which she accepted, but after sitting down with him still did not drink from the cup. Her expression was pensive. “The tea will get cold,” the elf said to break apart the silence. No response came for several more moments, so he sipped his own and tried not to stare. Its soothing warmth spread through his shoulders and chest, but did nothing to stem his headache.

A little bit longer came and went, then the cup clinked as the human set it on the table. “Beverly told me about Gideon.”

His sip came a little too sharp and Will had to spend a moment trying to stop himself from coughing up a lung or both. “She did?” Alana nodded as his respiration calmed. “Since when do you talk to Beverly?” he asked after his distress abated.

His companion furrowed her eyebrows and shook her head sadly. “I’ve been combat training with her for quite some time now, Will.”

He raised his own. “Combat training? What for?” Self-defense never hurt, but she was in a castle surrounded by guards and protective friends. The Empress and all of her chevaliers stayed there along with her spies. Alana lived with Hannibal and Abigail, and he had a feeling that both of them could, at the very least, protect themselves.

She shuffled slightly. “After everything that has been happening, with both you and Gideon, I felt like something needed to change. I was so resentful of the Chantry and what they had done that I decided not to associate with them at all, but if I want to change something that’s not going to work.”

“So you decided to go back?”

“I decided to join the Seekers,” Alana declared.

Huh. The Seekers usually try for younger recruits that have spent their entire life in service, but Will supposed that someone that was a Sister to the Chantry, even if it was just a Lay Sister. If she tried to go through Jack especially, the man would probably take her on after she proved herself. “I suppose that’s one way to go about it,” he finally replied. “I know with you watching my back I’ll certainly feel much safer.” He smiled, but even admitted to himself that it was a bit strained due to the increasing pain in his skull. Will shifted back in his seat to see if the change in position would alter the feeling and it did, but only slightly. “You said you heard about Gideon; what did you come to me for?”

She followed suit with his change in topic, “I also heard about whom he was targeting.”

“Ah,” he said.

“Are you going to be okay?”

The elf shrugged, “I don’t know, I guess. If I keep working, I think I’ll largely be left alone. Gideon has a lot bigger fish to fry, and they certainly involve less risk.” He hunched slightly and tried to ignore the throbbing in his temple. It was becoming all he could focus on. A muffled sound drew his attention away slightly. “What?”

Alana’s face was wrinkled and she stepped forward. “May I?” she asked, extending her hand out in front of her. It took him a moment to understand what she was asking of him, but Will eventually nodded. Her hand, when the back of it was placed on his forehead, was cool and reminded his brain that sensation could come from there that wasn’t pain. It was nice. What she said next was less so: “You feel really warm.” It was a flat pronouncement; a confirmation of what his friend had already suspected.

“There’s nothing wrong,” he tried to protest, but Alana was already shaking her head.

“You’re sick, Will. You shouldn’t be working!”

“I’m not!” he shot back.

“You’re not what?” said a voice at his door and the two turned to see Seeker Crawford shadowing his doorway.

The both of them quickly shut up like a couple of naughty children sneaking treats that were just caught by a parent. “I think Will is sick,” blurted out Alana and Will had to fight from shoving his face into his hands.

“I’m not sick; I just tend to run warm,” was his weak excuse and clearly his ‘boss’ knew it.

“Well, it’s a good thing I don’t plan to let you do anything but stay in the Circle chapterhouse.”

Will blanched. “What?”

“With everything that’s happening, we thought it best to put you under protective custody.”

“I’m being put under protective custody?” Will demanded. His voice was raising and he was trying not to let it get to a yell.

“Gideon is a Seeker with Seeker abilities; his unique one is the power to make lyrium burn in a person’s veins! I wonder what group of people have lyrium naturally occuring in their body?”

Will remained indignant, but conceded the point. “Mages.”

“Mages!” Jack repeated, yelling more than saying. “It does not affect Seekers, so let the Seekers do their job!”

“I thought I was a Seeker, Jack,” Will muttered. “If not in abilities then at least in heart and status.”

Jack fell silent. “You need to be protected Will,” he said after a moment, brooking no argument. “This is where you are not a Seeker. You are going to be vulnerable to him in a fashion that the rest of us aren’t.”

Will glared at Jack’s shoulder. “Two guards. No more.” Jack nodded and turned, nearly running into Alana.

“I can protect him,” she said, tone as vicious as her stare.

Jack replied slowly and steadily, “That is a Seeker’s job, not a noblewoman or a former Sister.”

Said former Sister crossed her arms, trying to stand her ground in front of a man almost twice her size. “I want to be a Seeker.”

Jack simply rolled his eyes, “We aren’t taking recruits at the moment.” Will could tell that the man wasn’t in the mood to deal with another confrontation or conflict at the moment and left to preserve what was left of his temper. Understanding did not make him sympathize with the man. “Go back to your suite in the Winter Palace, Alana. As far as I’m concerned, an inexperienced adult woman just ask me to bring her into the fold of one of the most prestigious groups of warriors this side of the Western Approach.” Will disagreed, but it was Jack and he was this close to angry. Best not to argue the point. “Maybe when you prove yourself, we can talk.”

Alana stormed off, leaving Jack and Will alone in the younger man’s small shack. The elf mage knew he looked beyond uncomfortable and was doing his best to mind his own business while the Seekers from Chilton that Jack pulled from outside to watch him got settled. He actually sent several others back to base, which made the mage feel conflicted. On one hand, Jack clearly didn’t think that he could handle himself in a tête-à-tête with Gideon. One the other, the ‘Seeker’ clearly valued him enough as a person that he would bring in the calvary for him.

No, Will needed to not be flattered. He was furious. Jack Crawford saw him as helpless and wouldn’t leave him alone. That’s what he told himself anyway; there was still a very large chunk of his mind that was simply too tired to give a shit one way or the other.

Jack stood across from him while his Mabari milled around the newcomers, making sure to sniff every part of them. Internally, Will was congratulating his hounds for enacting small bits of his revenge; the *Orlesian* Seekers seemed perturbed at the dogs making themselves very acquainted with them. “I know you don’t like the idea of sitting this out,” Jack began.

“Don’t like is an understatement.”

“Don’t sass me. Not right now,” Jack pressed and then started again. “I know you don’t like the idea of sitting this out, but there isn’t a crime scene to interpret or Fade spirits to consult. Yes you have your magic, but Gideon can dispel that.”

Will argued, “I can still try and figure out where he’ll go next. It’s not like we’ve found him.”

“But we know who the killer is and we know their motives,” Jack brought to the debate. Idly, the man reached dog and scratched behind one of the hound’s ears, Will thought it was Hafter. “Your presence will not speed up tracking him.” Jack stopped, a thought crossed his mind. Will watched as he appeared to think better of it, but then quickly decided to forge on with the idea anyway. “It isn’t just that. You look like the Void itself Will.”

Yes, Will knew that he was sick and probably looked even worse, but his health was not important with a killer on the loose. Also, saying that he appeared to have the Void in him seemed like it was a bit of an exaggeration. “I feel like shit. Actually, no. I feel fluid. I know I’ve come down with something, but I can still work.”

Jack spoke over him, “What we do can compromise your health, if you allow it.”

It was WIll’s turn to roll his eyes. “If I allow it?”

“The stress, the constant work, the unstable hours. I know how it can affect you, but you need to keep it in perspective. Examine yourself objectively.”

“Myself is a bit hazy,” Will admitted.

“You’re overwhelmed. You need to take care of yourself.” A short beat, then, ”Consider this a break. It may not be under the best of circumstances, but it will give you some time to heal.”

The elf chuckled at suggestion, “Rebuild my defenses?”

“Whatever it takes,” Jack agreed. “You take too much of this with you and hold it in. You need to let it go, as much as you can.” The bigger man stepped forward and placed a tentative hand on Will’s shoulder. It was strange, Jack didn’t seem the time to be tentative about anything. “Just don’t let yourself go with it.”

“It’s wound around me, Jack. Hard to scrap out what’s knotted in.”

“Then work on untangling it.”

“And if it tears?”

“We’ll cross that bridge if it comes to it. Luckily, I know a few people handy with repairs.”

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Abigail wanted to visit Georgia Madchen again. She felt drawn to the other young woman, someone that had a terrible experience and was still in the midst of it. She wanted to go with Will again, to break the ice and have a companion, but he was ‘unavailable’. At first, she was going to wait a little longer and just go eventually, but the young woman felt restless. Hannibal, Alana, and Will were all busy and she only had so much patience for the other nobles of her age, so Abigail decided to visit Georgia again.

“Will’s not with you?” Georgia asked from her place on the bed.

Abigail smiled, but it was a bitter one. It wasn't because the question was asked, but the reason for her answer. "Am I not good enough?"

Her companion laughed, "You are more than perfect! I was just curious."

"Nice save. Naturally he was summoned by the Seekers for another case. Busy, busy."

Neither of them said anything for a moment, both too caught up in their own stories. The word 'case' meant Will had to deal with another murderer, more victims, an increasing number of strange and unfortunate circumstances surrounding strange and unfortunate people. Not too long ago, Georgia was a murderer and a victim, depending on whom you asked and how they wanted to spin it. Abigail thought that Georgia thought of herself as the murderer far too much, neglecting to acknowledge the toll on her mind that Tranquility had taken. She still didn't even remember killing Beth Le'Beau; how could someone ascribe guilt to her?

"Why do you do that?" Abigail startled out of her reverie.

"What do you mean?"

Georgia shook her head, pale hands with skin still peeling gesturing around her. "You keep looking at me like I can help you understand something. You could just ask whatever it is that's on your mind."

The brunette hung her head. "Why do you think of yourself as a murderer?"

In response and retaliation, the blonde stared at her, incredulity warring with disbelief. "Because I am. I killed my friend. I can't remember killing her, but I can imagine it and even in my sleep I smell her blood on my hands." Georgia's posture slumped in the bed, so Abigail sat down next to her. She wasn't great at offering comfort; maybe once upon a time she was, but not anymore. She laid one hand on the scabbed, but otherwise clean pair of Georgia's, which the other young woman had folded neatly on the blanket. The blonde was crying. "Maker, they warned that this might happen, but it still takes me by surprise. After not feeling emotions for so long, even the slightest ones are overwhelming."

"I can empathize," Abigail said and Georgia looked doubtful.

"You were a part of a case, but you were rescued."

"You were too!"

Georgia shook her head. "I wasn't really. I was stopped before I could do something worse."

Abigail leaned forward and hesitated for a moment. The urge to speak was overtaking her; she wanted to share with someone that understood, that could understand. Here was a young woman that had killed people but was not responsible (at least she didn't think so). They could bond over this and talk about it with each other in ways that no one else could. "I really can, Georgia. I was-" It caught in her throat, but she made herself continue. "I was part of it too. I helped my dad."

Her friend's eyes widened. "You what?"

Abigail swallowed. Somehow, this was even harder than it was to tell Hannibal, but the anticipation of relief made her keep going. "My dad told me that if he didn't kill them, then he was going to kill me. I had to help him lure the girls and find out about them. Any information that would make it easier for him to find them later. I may not have done the deed directly, but I might as well have." She shuddered. "I see them when I sleep and, knowing that he fed them to us, sometimes I taste them."

"That's not your fault!" Georgia protested. "He pressured you into doing it and kept the threat of your life in his hands."

"And? If I had just died, the girls would still be alive."

"Somehow I doubt that," she declared, her face wrinkled in disgust. "Maybe one or two of them, but he would have found a way."

Abigail pursed her face. "Well if that's not my fault, then Beth's death isn't yours. You didn't even know what you were doing and can't recall the deed."

Georgia didn't say anything. "Doesn't feel good, does it?" Abigail asked, only slightly teasing.

"It really doesn't."

"That's what I thought."

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Jack leaving didn't do all that much for Will's temper. Logically, he knew that the Seeker had several well-founded and well thought out reasons for wishing Will to be out of the way. If it came to an actual confrontation, he would probably be a liability more than actual help. His magic would be useless and, if what Jack said about Gideon's abilities were true, even without using it he would be brought down quickly. Odds were that the squad would spend most of the fight taking care of his prone body and hoping they could keep him safe.

Even knowing all of that however, ire grew deep in his belly. None of the Seekers that Jack had assigned to guard him were ones that he was familiar with and it showed in their contempt and wariness. Jack claimed to need the squad because they were the best, good for them. They got to be heroes while he played the damsel in distress. The other Seekers did seem to like his Mabari (finally), though, which certainly made Will feel better about their presence.

While the three of them were interacting with the hounds, giving them plenty of pets and affection, Will heard it. There was a crunching noise, like steel smacking bone, coming from outside. The two Seekers, faces obscured by dark masks reacted to it as well, so he knew that it wasn't a dream. Neither of them moved and eventually all three relaxed. It was probably nothing important. The elf rationalized it as one of those in the surrounding Alienage

sneaking a look into the recluse's home and getting hurt for their troubles. The only thing they would really be doing is returning home with their bruised pride.

Warm breath fanned around his neck and Will swatted at its source. Nothing. He turned his head slightly and nearly reared back when he came face uncomfortably close to face with the halla from his dreams. Another moist puff of air covered him and the raven-feathered halla stared at him with beady and glittering eyes. The other two people in the room were still petting and loving his Mabari, so they didn't see it either. It wasn't real.

Wasn't it?

Will glanced around and stood. He spoke to his guests, "I need to get something; I'll be back." His voice was a dream-hazed gust. Perhaps he had received some murmur of acknowledgement or protest, but his mind was too far to place it. The halla was waiting patiently for him outside. Once he was with it, it took the path away from his little ramshackle home. The feathers on its back settled with the wind and the clip-clop of hooves hitting packed earth accompanied their march.

When it started roaming the fields, Will hesitated. A quick look back showed that he was already leaving shouting distance of the shack, or at least he would be if he kept going another moment longer. It wouldn't do to leave their protection so soon, maybe tomorrow. There was a guard that was supposed to be outside, but they weren't anywhere in sight. As Will contemplated going back, his beast decided to roam nearly outside of visual range, just hanging on the periphery. He sighed a took a couple of steps, but didn't realize that he had wandered somewhere suspiciously secluded.

Pain surged through his body, bring Will down to his knees. It felt like his insides were boiling and bubbling their way outside; a distant part of him noticed wetness around his legs from how hard he hit the ground. Will collapsed on his side, curling in to alleviate some of the searing to no avail. The dull thumping of footsteps vibrated against his head where he felt more than heard them. Soon they came to a stop and his opening eyes showed him the blurry image of booted feet.

A muffled voice was speaking above him, making it sound like he was underwater. Will concentrated, hoping to bring clarity and it worked. He didn't like what he heard.

"Well you don't look so well Monsieur Will." Fuck. It was Abel Gideon. Gingerly Will tried to reach out with his magic, but his stomach dropped out when he felt nothing.

It was gone!

"Ah-ah-ah!" Gideon sing-songed. "There'll be none of that now." The man crouched next to him. "I've been told that you know the Highwayman better than anyone; Chilton just can't keep his mouth shut." Fuck you Chilton. "The chatty bird said that you can feel his feelings, think his thoughts." That wasn't entirely true, but a very sad part of Will realized that this belief might be what is keeping him alive. "How about we go on a little trip? I have another quest waiting eagerly for your arrival."

Then, everything went dark.

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When Jack had returned to Will's little house in the Alienage, he was not expecting for the absolute massacre that he found. All three of the Seekers that he had left to watch over Will were scatters of red mess, brains broken up and scrambled in the remains of their skulls. He had returned with the squad, all of whom had begun to panic (even Brian).

"Will!" Brian yelled, rushing through the house while Jimmy rummaged through the remains for something recognizable. Beverly was walking the perimeter, trying to find any clues that might tell them where Gideon was headed next. The Senior Seeker sighed and delicately pinched the bridge of his nose. "Is there anything there?" he inquired to Jimmy, slightly anxious about whatever answer he received.

The other man shook his head and stood up calling out, "Brian! Get back over here! He's not here."

Beverly walked back inside, "There's nothing in here?"

The three men shook their heads. "He grabbed Will, but he didn't kill him."

"If he's trying to get revenge, why grab Will?" she asked. "His involvement was minimal at best."

"We already discussed this. He was fixating on anything to do with the Seekers and his state of mind, Will was associated with us and that specifically."

She shrugged, "That doesn't explain why he went after Will before any of us. He seemed to have singled Will out, enough that he decided to take him and not kill him."

"What would be the point?" Brian asked. "It's not like Will could solve his mind problems in any way, whether by magic or otherwise."

Jack tasted the familiar tang of epiphany. "He can understand them though and is in a unique position to grant clarity. Spirits imprint on these sorts of things."

"Um… Jack. Spirits imprint on the perceptions of the viewers. They would only be able to tell Gideon what he already knows and believes."

"Gideon doesn't know that. Gideon also probably believes that Will is high profile enough that he would interest the Highwayman. Someone with the potential to grab them."

"And to hurt you," Beverly pointed out. "Again."

"Yeah," Jack agreed and was so poised in his own thoughts that he nearly startled when something warm brushed against him. One of Will's Mabari rubbed against his leg and into his hand, begging for comfort. Idly, the Seeker gave it to the hound. The other three respectfully went about their business.

"Don't worry," Jack reassured. "We'll get him back." He didn't know if it was meant for the dog or for himself.

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Will woke, head lolling wildly against the edge of a table. Sharply, he jerked up and away from the floor, unintentionally yanking on the chains strung behind the chair he was sitting in to back around the far leg of the counter serving as his pillow. The resulting pose left his shoulders and neck braced against the wood as prevention from fighting gravity to keep himself up and from keeling sideways as the chair was flush with the table. His legs were attached to the chair legs and his arms were pulled under him, keeping him from sitting up.

“I apologize about your discomfort,” drawled a voice echoing around him. The hairs on his arms stood up and gave him a vague awareness of where Abel Gideon was standing in the room when sound couldn’t be an effective gauge of position. “It was unfortunately necessary to keep you from casting any spells when I couldn’t be here to do this.” The burning fire from earlier split his body open and Will screamed as his blood was set aflame.

It only lasted a moment before and hand was petting his head and Gideon was gently shushing him. The elf tried to reach out with his magic and his body was wracked with one small sob when he found nothing. “I won’t do that again if I don’t have to, but you mages are always so tricky and magic can be so dangerous. Sometimes it’s not even your fault. I’m going to let you out of the restraints in a minute, but I need you to know that I can stop you at any time far before you can try anything with me.”

Normally, Will would doubt the ability of one person with magic cancelling abilities to stop even just one mage, but the power to make the lyrium in a person’s blood boil gave the other man a distinct advantage. Unless Will wanted to resort to some sort of blood magic, there was nothing that he could really do. He could try and fight his way out without magic, but he wasn’t particularly good at hand to hand combat and, even out of shape, Gideon had years of practice and experience on him. For now, he would have to play along. Noticing Will’s lack of protest and rebellion, Abel grinned (so much so that Will could hear it in his voice), “Good! Now we can get properly acquainted.”

There was a release in his arms and Will gingerly sat up. A stab of vertigo flushed from the top of his head to his numb toes and he had to lean on the table before he could do so completely. Gideon knelt in front of him and removed the leg restraints before doing the same to the cuffs. Once the man was done, he half-sat on the table in front of him; WIll remained in the chair, not trusting himself to stand just yet.

“I have a proposition for you, a little deal that can benefit us both.” Will remained silent. “We both know that you can understand killers, people like me.” Gideon trailed off and stared at the elf as if he was waiting for a response, some sort of assertion or protest. Will continued his absence of sound. “We also know that you are Jack Crawford’s new little protege and that you tend to catch the interest of serial killers. I was thinking that you could help get the Highwayman’s attention.”

“What?” Will sputtered. Logically, he had known that this was Gideon’s goal, but to know in theory and hear proof aloud are two separate things, especially since his plan was idiotic.

“Now he speaks!” the killer grinned. “I thought it would be marvelous for you to join me when the Highwayman gets here. We could have a little party!”

“Didn’t you say that you were the Highwayman?” Will goaded and was met with a flat stare.

“I understand that I’m a little fuzzy on this, but please do not patronize me, specifically when you were the one trying to grant me clarity.”

Will bowed his head, “My apologies.”

Gideon waved his hand back and forth dismissively, “None needed, none taken. You drew attention to something I had been ignoring: the fiction of my memories. They were stories I was telling myself as if they were mine. I remember the murder of those poor lambs in the Circle so vividly that I’m surprised I didn’t notice it early.” He turned to Will, eyes glassy. “The new ones lacked a certain vivaciousness.”

Will glanced around with a gulp, trying to figure out where he was. Everything was so barren and quiet that it took a moment for him to realize that it was a warehouse, but Gideon had changed the inner layout to match that of the Observatoire de Verchiel. “I know, it’s not the same, but we simply don’t have a week. There’s no way I’d be able to get you to the Observatoire before the Seekers caught up with me. At least I could make our friend feel at home.” Gideon smiled and leaned down into Will’s face. “Let’s hope he gets the invitation.”

Abruptly, the former Seeker pulled away and began walking to a portion of the room blocked off by sheets. He glanced behind and motioned at Will, “Come now! You didn’t think I only brought you here as bait?”

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This was the part Jack was the most reluctant about. Ever since they found out that Will had gone missing, the older man knew that he was going to report it to the elf’s sponsor and their joint ward. Alana was apparently there as well, which made the trip ultimately easier; he’d rather she found out from him than Beverly or Hannibal. His mother, Maker rest her soul, always said that anticipation often made things a lot worse, boiling the dread in your belly. She also always said that anticipation always made things sweeter if it involved something that he wanted, but that was a matter for another time.

The door to the suite of Comte Lecter opened on the unimpressed face of Lady Alana Bloom. She greeted him flatly with: “Jack.” Afterwards, she stood aside and allowed him inside. “Is the Comte here? Young Lady Abigail?”

“Yes to both, Jack. Why are you here?” she probed.

“I’ll say once I’ve got everyone in the same room. I’d rather not repeat myself.” She sighed and went out to fetch them. It took several minutes for her to comeback, which wasn’t the longest time a noble made him wait for something, but the circumstances made it feel like a small eternity. “We’re here. What is it?” Alana said to him when she returned, just shy of turning this into an interrogation.

“Will is missing,” Jack said, trying to push it out of his mouth before he could say anything else. “We got to his house earlier today and he was nowhere to be found. All of his guards

were utterly destroyed, organs strung about, and their brains were scrambled inside their heads."

"You're not suggesting he did that?" Abigail asked, looking suspicious. Jack forgot that, unlike the other two, this young woman didn't know the details of the investigation. Hannibal wasn't supposed to know it either, but it is clear that Will told him like Beverly told Alana. "Not at all," he said in response. "Sadly, there is a killer on the loose and it appears that he has gotten ahold of Will." Her face changed, near imperceptibly in all but her large, blue, expressive eyes. They widened and shined with tears. "No," she said. "He's okay."

"We have reason to believe that Abel Gideon took him from his home as well as Frederick Chilton. He was attempting to contact the Highwayman, so we fear the worst." Abigail's face was stone, but it was clear she worried about the young man that had saved her life. Jack felt a pang of sympathy for her as she retreated to another part of the room. "We believe that he thinks Will can help him somehow and associates the mage with the problems going on in his mind." Alana glared slightly and retreated with the young woman, clearly trying to comfort her in some fashion.

While Alana spoke with Abigail in private, Jack found himself being pulled aside by Comte Lecter. The man appeared only slightly ruffled, but there was something behind his eyes that made Jack nervous; Hannibal usually seemed so unflappable, but, in this moment, the noble was deeply concerned about Will and his fate. The elf was in the Maker's hands now and only through His will would they find the young man alive. Jack wanted to not be responsible for the death of another 'protege' and he found himself caring for what he once thought of as an asset. He no more wanted Will dead than anyone else, but his Lordship's eyes betrayed him.

The Rivaini man had a feeling that he would need to seek a different sponsor for Will soon or at least see that their professional relationship had some oversight. Did he need to talk to Will about sex? Maker, he hoped not. Maybe he would ask Beverly to… It was his utmost fervent hope that Jack would be forced into that awkward position rather than the alternative in this moment. He gave a prayer to the Maker that Will would be alive for Jack to embarrass them both.

"Jack!" Hannibal whispered to him urgently, pulling Jack's attention back to the matter at hand. "You said that Gideon took Will, because of the connection to his mind."

Jack nodded, "We believe that he thinks Will can clarify the differences between himself and the Highwayman, as Will was the one campaigning the hardest for him to not be connected to the killer. There's a possibility that Gideon believes Will can understand the both of them, perhaps even draw in the Highwayman's interest."

"Bait," Hannibal concluded darkly.

"It would seem so."

"If he wants to draw out the Highwayman, Halamshiral would be the wrong place to do it."

The Seeker looked over at him skeptically. If that was the only factor, naturally it wouldn't make any sense to be in Halamshiral, but it was clear that some of this had to do with the sheer opportunity that the major city presented and the limitation that would exist if he were to try and cross the wilds and plains with the elf in tow. Halamshiral may have been the wrong place, but it was the only place. Jack said as much to Hannibal.

"If he's trying to draw out the Highwayman, he needs to set the bait in a trap that the Highwayman would notice and not ignore."

"And?"

"Where would be the best place to draw out the Highwayman?"

It struck Jack, "The scene of one of his crimes."

Hannibal agreed, "He would be paying attention in case he accidentally left clues or if something significant happened at one of his former crime scenes."

"Will strongly suspected that the Highwayman was killing while Silvestri was active."

"But which crime scene belonged to which killer was never completely sorted out," Hannibal reminded him. That did make it more difficult. "You need something more concrete."

Jack realized, "The Observatoire. Or something like it."

"That was the location of the last known Highwayman murder, but Gideon can't get that far."

Jack thanked the Comte for his advice and immediately went back to his squad. Barking orders, Jack organized the group into something a little more battle ready and began his search. Behind him, the Seeker could feel the gazes of the three people he had come to tell, each with worry and sorrow shining in their eyes and each accusing him with them in their own way. He had already accused himself more than enough for the rest of them.

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Will was not prepared for what awaited him behind the dusty sheets obscuring parts of the mock Observatoire. Lying unconscious on a cot and decked in loose clothing befitting that of a person visiting a healer was: "Chilton," Will whispered.

"Ah yes! High Seeker Chilton!" Gideon practically crowed. "I grabbed him while he was in town and have been saving him for something special. Unfortunately, if I want to do this properly, I need the presence of a healer."

"I'm not a healer," Will protested, but Gideon soon interrupted. "You may not be a healer, per say, but you do know a basic healing spell."

Will swallowed and nodded, "You would trust me to do magic?" Gideon grinned and, faster than Will could track, grabbed a dagger and inserted it through Chilton's guts. He dragged it through skin, separating the flesh neatly before plunging his other hand in.

“I do now,” Gideon said. “Because if you don’t do the most basic of healing spells, Frederick will die. If you go overboard and close my hand in his flesh, Frederick will die. If you decided to attack me while I’m inside his body and have ahold of his innards, Frederick will die.” Will heard Chilton whimper underneath Gideon and wake up just enough to start panicking. The man with his arm inside of his body was ignored by both of them.

“What do I care of Chilton dies?”

“I think you do care,” Abel replied. “I think you care a lot more than you wish you did.”

Will hesitated and then carefully laid a hand on Frederick Chilton’s shoulder, then another one. A deep inhale and exhale before he poured a healing spell into the other man’s skin. It was strange to have his magic back and a large part of Will wanted to lash out against Gideon and free the magic broiling beneath his skin. Sadly, Gideon was right; Will cared about Chilton’s death, much as he wished that he didn’t. So, Will kept a small healing spell going and prayed that someone would come soon.

Then, the ex-Seeker began pulling out some of Chilton’s innards, always leaving a hand still inside of the body to insure that Will would not move against him. Chilton started to wake up and immediately began begging, “Please! You’re not the Highwayman! There’s nothing making you do this!”

“You’re right and it is a lovely feeling! Nothing is making me do this, but I do have to. You got inside my mind, Frederick,” Gideon replied, derision leaking from every syllable. “It’s only fair that I get inside your belly.” The crazed man pointed to Will, “You’ve met our young elf friend before, he will be assisting me today by keeping you alive.”

Will nodded to the barely conscious man that he was trying to heal and Chilton gave a weak, “Hi.”

“I have to wonder Frederick,” Abel said, still treating the other man’s name like a curse or a piece of bitter candy. “Did you ever think that the real Highwayman would kill again?”

“If he did, he would be dismissed as a copycat,” Chilton said, voice wispy.

“Well I hope he considers this an apt apology for my part in the insult. I do wonder what gave you the idea for your little deception.”

“I was trying to find an alternative to Tranquility.”

Will nearly stopped the healing spell in shock, but Gideon had removed enough of Chilton’s bowels that leaving him without too long would mean certain death. Perhaps in a few minutes he could go without, but not right now. “Alternative to Tranquility?” Will asked, slightly wondrous. Gideon gave him a sharp glance, but otherwise made no comment.

“Tranquil… not right. They can’t say no to anything.”

A pit formed in Will’s gut and he thought to Georgia, whom had been tranquil for far too long. Can’t say no to anything? “They just are,” Chilton continued. “Some… don’t see

people. At least this would let them be people."

Gideon laughed, "This would let them be people? I wasn't any more capable of telling you my own opinion and wishes than a Tranquil; they were all yours." He chuckled, "Gutless and witless," he claimed as he finished pulling out the small intestine, still connected inside of the body. Abel dumped it on Frederick's chest. "Hold this for me."

"Wha-What are you doing?" the man asked, barely aware.

"The Highwayman is a collector. I thought I'd give him a few novelty items. One of a kind." He pointed at the intestine now sliding off of Chilton. Gideon took the hand not inside of the man and slapped him on the face, leaving handprints in Chilton's own blood. "Hold that please, would hate to get it dirty and our friend Will is far too occupied with keeping you alive."

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In order to make sure that this was done right, Jack had his entire team of Seekers plus a couple of more that recently answered the call. Took them long enough. The entire group was pushing to go sooner rather than later, wanting to wreak vengeance on the man that killed three of their own. His squad was preparing themselves for anything that they might find, including a dead Will. The senior Seeker wasn't quite sure that he was ready to deal with that, so he didn't expect his team to be just yet. This especially includes Beverly, whom was being comforted by an anxious Alana. To soothe over some worries, the leader has also brought in a couple of mage healers that he had given strict instructions to remain away from wherever they could potentially find Gideon.

The moon was high overhead and it was a cloudless night. The soft light illuminated the world around them and only seemed to press into Jack's mind the need for more time. They couldn't afford to wait for the sun to come up; Will might not be alive by then. It had taken them a while, but they managed to properly follow up on Comte Lecter's hunch and began searching the warehouses around the area (or anything else suitably empty and abandoned). Alana worked hard at the forefront of the group, giving ideas for the scouts and keeping people under control. It took them a full three hours, but eventually one of Jack's scouts came sprinting back to the group.

"Jack!" they screamed, almost running into one of the other team members while trying to stop. "Jack!' They careened into Jimmy, who held fast to end their momentum. The young Seeker panted, entire body heaving. "Someone's still alive in there! It looks like High Seeker Chilton."

"And Will?" They looked puzzled. "The elf!" The novice shook their head.

"No one else in the building. I don't think the High Seeker has much longer."

Jack gave the exhausted young person a pat on the back and turned to shout, "We need a healer immediately! High Seeker Chilton is down."

Everyone around sprung into action, frantically trying to sort out who was going, who was staying, who was on guard, etc. Once again, Alana was organizing everyone, but managed to be suitably subtle so that there weren't any complaints about a civilian taking charge. Jack didn't have the heart or the care to stop her when she was being more effective than some of his team. The large man turned back to the warehouse, despair building as he wondered where Will had gone and if he was okay. If the young man wasn't here, then where was he and what had Gideon done with him?

Most worrying of all: was he even still alive?

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Will couldn't remember how he got here.

One moment, he was desperately trying to keep Chilton alive, concentrating on pouring healing magic into the wounds at a steady, but minimal pace. The next, he was back in his shack, staring at Comte Hannibal Lecter, while next to him was Garrett Hobbs, smile decaying into his face. Echoing in the back of his mind were the sounds coming from his Hounds, clearly put where they could not disturb this meeting.

He was very aware of the closed door behind him and put one palm out towards Garrett Hobbs, magic gathering at his fingertips. "What-" Will swallowed and tried to gather himself. "What is he doing here?"

Both men shifted and Hannibal tilted his head slightly, face carefully impassive. "What is who doing here?"

"I- How did I get here? Why is he here?" Will pointed to Hobbs, dread climbing and creeping up his spine, lighting up his insides. He pushed his feet forward, moving in-between the killer and his sponsor. He carefully kept his back angled away from both men, mind reminding him of the danger posed by a knife going through it.

That didn't make sense. Hannibal wouldn't do that to him. He heard Hannibal asking him to clarify and decided to respond, "Creators I feel like I'm losing it! Everything is just slipping away and it only makes sense with everything that's happened. Of course he would be here!"

"Who, Will?"

Tears crept in at the corner of his eyes, the stress too much on his body that he couldn't staunch their flow. "Garrett Hobbs."

The corpse slid forward, bits of skin flaking in every direction and infecting his house with the essence of the dead. It didn't need more than it already had with him breathing everything in. A hand landed on his shoulder and he started for a moment before realizing that it belonged to Comte Lecter. Hobbs' presence made him feel like more ghosts were going to spring up. Who would be next? Silvestri? Will spent so long thinking that this wasn't real, that the dead couldn't return. Maybe they can't. Maybe he is just so deep in his own head, caught by a demon that he can't expel. Even with his experience with possession, would he even know?

“Your name is Will. You are in your home in the Alienage, late in the evening-”

“Stop!” Will yelled. “I know who I am! I know where I am! I don’t care; I want to know…” He braced magic at the other figure in the room, gathering energy into his palms. His staff was missing, but he didn’t need it for this. “Is he real?” No response came. “I can see him, but is he there?”

“Will,” Hannibal seemed to hesitate. He looked over to where Will was pointing, but just off. “I don’t see anyone.”

“No!” Will argued, crying in desperation. Couldn’t he see? “He’s. Right. There.” The younger man gestured at the dead body in the room. Now that he thought about it, he couldn’t smell the rot that surely must be on the man. The only stench was his own sweat and salty tears.

The hand on his shoulder tightened and relaxed. “There’s no one there, Will.”

The elf gritted his teeth and hissed, “You’re lying.”

“We’re alone. You came here alone. You must have gotten away from Gideon, try to remember how you got here.”

Will sobbed, and the hand he wasn’t using to cast a spell clutched at the one on his shoulder, grasping for something tangible. “Please don’t lie to me!”

Hannibal spun him around and instantly it felt wrong. He should never turn his back on a threat, but now both of the man’s hands were on his shoulders, weighing him down into the floor. “Garrett Hobbs is dead. You killed him. You watched him die.”

“No. No. No,” Will muttered.

“Let go of the spell Will!”

Reluctantly, he did, and his energy was abruptly sapped from him. The last thing that he remembered after that was collapsing forward into the noble’s chest and thinking that he really hoped he wouldn’t get in trouble for this.

He blinked and pushed his hands towards his face, feeling frantic as they parted soft, dead skin and entered places under the flesh. He felt the bones of his skeleton, fragile under packed meat. If he pressed forward, would he be able to crush his sinus, collapse his face? Another blink.

Will found himself doing something else, somewhere else, sometime later.

The elf was barely able to pool enough surprise in his body together to seem even remotely shocked or worried. There was a mist settled in his mind and brain, something that reminded him of possession but it lacked the delicate touch of the spirit of Compassion that he had bonded with. The mist was fog and it pressed on his consciousness, desperately keeping him under and unaware, but Will was awake. When he woke to find himself outside the guard

barracks, there was not much to do. He tried to recall something, anything, about his journey and only felt his mind grasp damp. A voice echoed in his mind.

“Can you hear me?” He felt himself nod.

“Repeat after me: My name is Will.”

He whispered, “My name is Will.” His tongue felt swollen and he noticed idly that it appeared that he bit it during his fugue.

“Raise both of your arms.” He did, although he must have looked silly to anyone passing by.

There was no one passing by. His only companions were the sheer emptiness of the world around him and the voice in his head. The voice pushed his arms back down, gently.

“Good! I was worried. We need to get you to a healer. What is the last thing that you remember?”

“I was with Garrett Hobbs,” Will replied.

“You thought he was in the room with you, that he was alive.”

Thought? He hadn’t thought that it happened, he knew. “I saw him!” He needed to find him again. Will began to walk out, ready to take on the spectre that had been haunting him. It was time to finish this game and the elf refused to have this human linger around him any longer.

“Will! Where are you going?”

“I’m finding him.”

“He isn’t real! You killed him once; don’t let that let you slip away. Together, we can find a way to kill him again.”

Kill him again? That sounded like a good idea. Could you kill a ghost? He got rid of Silvestri, but that didn’t seem like killing him. Regardless, if he could stop Hobbs, Will would be free. That much he knew.

Heaving, Will eventually found the traces of the spirit haunting him in the air. His body still felt like it was floating, pushing out of reach and out of sight, even with him still in it. Rain hit his face, landing in his eyes more than once and blurring out the world. The light of the moon was obscured by clouds and buildings, throwing what little there was into relief on the ground and walls. Candles and torches from the insides of homes colored the air, fire warring with the night. Each step was a small victory, but he wasn’t sure against what.

Before him stood Garrett Hobbs, devoid of any warmth. What he might have had bled into the cobblestones, sloughed off with the rain. He stood next to him, magic building under his

skin and he allowed it to brim there. Still, he held it there and did not let it spread further.

“You know, I don’t know if I’ll feel like myself ever again. I don’t know if there’s a self left to feel like, if it’s still in me.” Garrett Hobbs’ decaying face looked down and then back up again and Will realized where they were. They were hovering outside of the Winter Palace, just far away enough to not be seen or recognized by any of the guards. If he peered further, Will could see the long windows, nearly floor to ceiling on each story, and some of the nobles milling about inside of the building. “I spent so much time believing that I was him that it got harder to remember who I was when I wasn’t him.”

Strange to hear from Hobbs, but a part of Will knew it wasn’t him. It couldn’t be. *Garrett Hobbs is dead. You killed him. You watched him die.* This couldn’t be him. “Who are you now?”

The corpse slowly turned its head towards him, a large grin on his face. “You.”

The comparison struck him and Will felt phantom bleeding inside. The rain was warm, too warm, and struck his skin like the sword. “We’re both here now, seeing this place that we don’t belong. Can’t be in two places at once.” Hobbs turned back towards the Palace. “Hard to exist here in this world when you can’t escape your own head.”

Quickly, “I want to get out,” Will replied and his companion gave a small laugh.

“We all want things we can’t have.” He stood up straighter and looked towards the entrance of the palace. There, Will saw Abigail entering the building. Her mask was carefully on her face, so any expression was missing, but her mouth was gently turned down in a frown. The guards let her inside without comment. “I wonder…” Hobbs said and Will was reminded of who he is with. “I wonder if I kill her like he would kill her… Could I understand him better? Could I hear the cold drips in his darkness, watch the world through his red haze?” The last part came out in a whisper, “I wonder if then you could finally understand who you’ve become.”

Before he could even think about it, Will acted. The magic that had been sitting there was unleashed and blasted Hobbs back. By the time he approached the body again, Hobbs wasn’t Hobbs anymore; it belonged to Abel Gideon. In his own haze, Will heard people scrambling around the gate, guards alerted to the noise that he made. It was only then that the elf became aware that he had been screaming. He closed his mouth, and the tide of vertigo overwhelmed. Will felt the rain shift his stance and he fell forward into the dirt.

<-.->

Jack stood vigilantly outside of the room where Will Graham lay sleeping. The man apparently had been extremely sick by the time he had taken down Gideon; they found them a little before daybreak, both men unconscious on the ground subject to the whims of the spring night. The young elf had been nearly dead and Gideon had been on his way before they got a few healers (both magical and non-magical) on the scene.

The Seeker had felt a pang of guilt for being unable to protect his friend, but Will could, apparently, take care of himself, Seeker powers or no. It was a giant confidence boost for

Jack; no matter what stood in his way, the mage would always be able to bounce back.

Footsteps interrupted his musing and he turned to see the worried face of Comte Lecter. The noble had been demanding that Jack send him a message about his friend and get him access to see him; Jack thought that was strange, considering that the Empress favored him and could get him anywhere he wanted. There was always the possibility that he had either fallen in her opinion or simply didn't want to overextend his reach with her. Regardless, Jack sent the message and now the man had arrived.

Hannibal slowed to a stop as he got closer to the door. He asked, "How is he?" in a hushed voice, as if speaking loudly outside the room would bother those inside.

"Doing better," Jack replied. "When the found him, he had a deadly fever and wasn't going to last more than a few more hours, but he made it through the day and they think he'll last the night. Unfortunately, they have yet to identify what exactly ails him." Idle worries and thoughts of Bella flooded through Jack's head, but now wasn't the time. He needed to hold out hope.

"And all of the others?"

He sighed and shifted to lean slightly against the wall. Soon, he was going to have to sit down, but not yet. "Chilton is fine. Will did a great job keeping him alive through the ordeal. What he didn't do a great job on is killing Gideon. Normally, we would have executed him ourselves, but the Lord Seeker commanded us to stand down." If the Senior Seeker was a much younger man, he would have sullenly kicked something, probably a rock. As it were, he was not.

Neither man spoke for a moment, but Jack knew that Hannibal wanted to. "You seem confident."

That wasn't exactly true and they both knew it, but Jack was certainly more confident than he was a couple of days ago. "Will was almost dead and he brought Gideon down. He's going to be fine. Will is always going to come back; I have to believe it. I do believe it." Will was one of the strongest people he knew, in spirit if not physically. To claim otherwise was to do the man a disservice.

"Jack, I think you should pull him out of the field."

"What makes you say that?" Jack inquired, genuinely curious about the seeming change of heart.

"Will has always had a tenuous sense of self, not constant or even continuous. I have less of a grasp on his relationship with spirits and the Fade than I did when this began. I worry about what kind of exposure he is getting while working with you. There's a chance that you should keep his protection detail, if only to protect him from himself."

Hannibal is being serious. That… Jack couldn't agree with that. For one, he had already upset Will the first time when the young man could clearly take care of himself. Secondly, to insinuate that Will needed protection from himself means that Hannibal had reason to worry

about Will's presence of mind. That meant the Comte thought demons were involved or at least something like it.

"Are you saying what I think you are?"

"I only worry," his Lordship replied. "Neither of us can go into the Fade with him. We have no idea what he encounters there or what kind of things he brings back with them."

"Will is still himself."

Hannibal was quick to interject, but careful about not interrupting, "I do not disagree. What I'm concerned about is how much longer will he be." Laying a hand on Jack's shoulder, he continued, "We are all shaped by our experiences, for good or for ill. How are Will's experiences going to shape him?"

Jack glanced at the door and thought for a moment. There was someone that he needed to speak to that could help resolve this problem. Someone to which he also owed an apology and, with it, would give him a way to protect Will without overstepping.

As quietly as possible, Jack stepped into the main room in the little healer's office. Low murmurs came from one of the side rooms, separated only by three constructed walls and a curtain, but with enough space for a whole family to rest comfortably. There were four, three of which had wide open curtains. One of those looked resided in, so the Seeker assumed that the young Mademoiselle Madchen was with the others. Upon opening the last room, Jack saw that he was correct.

Will was laid out on a cot surrounded by chairs; in those chairs rested four young women: Abigail, Georgia, Beverly, and, the woman he was looking for, Alana. The two younger women were fast asleep as Alana and Beverly whispered together, keeping their voices hushed to not disturb the other inhabitants of the room. The senior Seeker was aware that he was by no means a quiet person and would not be able to remain there long without accidentally making some noise. He waited until Beverly noticed him before making several gestures to request Alana's presence outside of the healer's den. His second nodded and silently requested that he go back outside. As he left, Jack noticed their continued conversation, but left it be.

A few silent (and slightly awkward) moments of him remaining vigilant at the door passed before Alana joined him. "Have you seen Will?"

"I just did."

"You know what I mean."

Jack sighed out, "Yes, I have. I oversaw the transfer process personally. Wanted to make sure there was no funny business, what with the Lord Seeker being up our collective asses."

"Is that all? Didn't want to get in trouble with Prurnell?"

“No, Alana,” he explained. “I wanted to make sure that Will would still be allowed to be free. After what he’s done for everyone, he deserves that much.”

She glared, “I told you not to put him out there.”

“I’m not going to do him a disservice here. Will largely agreed to stay on his own and is more than capable of handling himself.” He waited for her to loosen before continuing, “I called you out here because I owe you an apology. I am sorry Alana, for doubting you and your conviction. You were a massive boon during this and deserve a commendation for helping us locate High Seeker Chilton and Will. Although I don’t know how you got some of your information.” Jack gave her massive side-eye and Alana suitably blushed in embarrassment. He knew that he would be speaking with Beverly in private later. “Will may have taken down Gideon, but both of those men would be dead without you. I am agreeing…”

Her face brightened and he put a hand up, “I am agreeing to consider bestowing membership to the Seekers on one condition.”

The brunette was breathless, “What is it?”

He smiled. “You continue your training with me.”

Chapter End Notes

The notes look super awkward at the top, so I'm moving them to the end.

I had a lot of fun with this chapter, but will admit that by the end I wanted to throw something at a wall. I have an order of events planned out, but my personal quest to limit the amount of perspectives I used meant I wasn't going to indulge in Gideon's and caused some problems for me. At the end, Will is barely conscious of what's going on and I was super worried that it made the ending super disjointed (more than I intended anyway).

I'm glad a few of you all seem to be enjoying this still! I've been going back and forth on continuing the story, but I'm leaning towards continuing. I'll admit to enjoying it more than not. I am going to actually open up requests at the end of this nonsense, both for here and the Vir Dirthara.

So (if anybody actually reads my notes), if there's a moment in time in the story you would love to see expanded on (a scene alluded to, something that is there but not in the main story, etc.), send me a request. Basically, I'm looking for some prompted time stamps or interludes. For the Vir Dirthara, if you guys have some lore you want explained (and haven't checked out Ghil Dirthalen> please do, she's awesome) or at least want the take on it in the story, let me know. For funsies, I have also been making character sheets (Dragon Age ttrpg style) for the main players and will be sharing them in the Vir Dirthara at the end of Vir Assan.

Na melana sahlin

Chapter Summary

> "Believe in whatever you like; absent creators or whimsical gods. Follow prophets or ashkaari, or omens in the earth and sky. You will find wisdom only if you seek it." - Sten, Dragon Age: Origins

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
>
> This chapter is an entire section late, and I appreciate everyone's patience. The last couple of weeks were very bad as my little sister ended up in the hospital after a week of a tremendous amount of pain. She's finally healing, which is great.
>
> The new summary might be odd for some of you. I thought that there is a ton of Hannibal dialogue (naturally) in this story so I decided to incorporate some Dragon Age dialogue somehow. I think I'll put relevant quotes as the summary, including some in retrospect for my own amusement.
> Elven translations at the bottom.
>
> Na melana sahlin: Your time is/has come.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been almost a week, and young Will was still very ill and resting in the healer's ward, which left Hannibal with absolutely no one to talk to. Not that he could speak with Will on this particular matter anyway, but it left him with something of a hole. There were very few people with whom the Comte found he could converse on that kind of level. So, his Lordship went to the next person.

Baroness Bedelia du Maurier was as ecstatic to see him as ever, meaning that she trembled with the anticipation one received when their subconscious knew the presence of a predator, but her fascination prevented her from acting on her instincts. It was always a treat to watch the war she underwent every time that he came calling for entertainment. Upon his arrival, she had offered him a glass of wine (which he accepted, no need for rudeness) and poured herself a generous portion as well. He didn't feel the need to eliminate her, but if he did so at least she would be pre-marinated.

Hannibal made himself at home in one of the lounge chairs, but maintained a certain sense of propriety in the way that he held himself. It wouldn't do to lose even an ounce of decorum now. They sat in silence for a few moments before he eventually broached the subject of his visit: "Will is troubled."

The Baroness daintally crossed her legs to prevent any fidgeting. "And that troubles you beyond normal conventions of sponsor and protege?"

He nodded, "I wish to see him succeed, even when his madness spreads. It colors the world around him like Blight and like war."

"Both of those are immensely destructive, but often give value to someone. Do you plan to be the one to profit from this?"

Hannibal chuckled, "You're suggesting that I am using him for something?"

"Are you?"

"No."

Her face went very still, not even the slightest twitch would betray her expression to an observer, one that was not himself at least. Bedelia may have been a natural at hiding her emotions, but they both were trained under the Dowager together and he could read her better than any book. His lack of motive for profit (whether by money or power) greatly disturbed her. They were nobles, politicians. Their only goal ever was **more**, but he had finally found where he needed more and Will could give it to him. It was not in money or power, but in a quality of life he could only achieve with companionship. Hannibal recognized that their silence was prolonged and that Bedelia would speak no more without prompting, so he decided to explain himself, a little. "Early on, Will understood that he would experience the world differently than other people. He saw them in ways that common folk couldn't begin to comprehend."

"So did you," the Baroness spoke, but it sounded slightly derisive.

"As any sponsor inevitably does, I see myself in my protege," he deflected.

"In his madness?"

"Madness can be a cure. We deal with it far too little since Reville left us." She shuddered.

"Unfortunately some deal with it far too much. It is a cure that can easily turn into poison."

He corrected, "Only in the wrong amounts. Besides, a way to teach the body to endure poison by taking it in small doses. We are preemptively taught to handle the trials beyond normal life."

His longtime fellow student took a very large sip of wine, only barely refraining from the better classification of 'swallow'. She blinked once, then twice. "Your dreamer Will does not present you with the problems of normal life." It sounded like it should have been a question,

but it was clearly a statement. Bedelia was riding the line between polite concern and prying. Hannibal wondered if she knew how close to the edge she was treading.

“He does not,” the Comte replied nevertheless, too amused at the direction that the conversation was taking.

“What does he present you with them?”

One could hardly say companionship. It would put out a sense of vulnerability that he even required a companion. Furthermore, Bedelia definitely had servants that were listening and either functioned as spies for other houses or Bedelia herself. And yet… he still felt the urge to be honest with her. The noble raised an eyebrow, trying to convey his opinions on the matter of Will. Bedelia seemed to understand, because the next thing that she said wasn’t what he wanted to hear, but was relevant regardless.

“You need to take a step back. He is your protege, Hannibal, not your ward. There is no reason in the eyes of the court for you to be taking so much interest in him and this behavior will only make you suspicious.”

“Watch him lose his mind?” Lose my opportunity for friendship?

She nodded sagely, “Sometimes, all we can do is watch. Better him lose his mind than you lose your life.”

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Will was admittedly not on his best leg when he rose from his cot to see Georgia elsewhere in the healer’s hall. The healer, Wynne, had demanded that he wear loose fitting clothes which did little to cover him or warm him in the draft of spring. Thus, he decided to roam around in a blanket worn as a robe, sipping from the flask that the older mage had all but forced on him. The healer was strangely severe and comforting at the same time, telling him to keep himself healthy and drink or she would tie him to the bed. Naturally, he acquiesced.

Georgia was much in the same position, although she did have a manacle attached to the bed. Will had seen Wynne scowl at it many times, but that particular restraint was not her doing or choice. It was the product of the young woman now being well enough to walk on her own (just barely), which made the authorities involved necessitate the inconvenience. Will was not conscious at the time it was put in place and could not talk Jack into talking the Templars out of it.

She looked up from her book when he approached and smiled. “You look better,” he said and she laughed. “So do you. It’s nice to feel alive for once. Do I finally look that way as well?”

The elf nodded, “You **look** pretty.”

The younger Somniari shook her head. He knew that she hadn’t felt pretty in quite some time. The constant attention of Will and Abigail was probably overwhelming to someone that thought she was dead only a little over a week ago. He had idly noticed an increased worrying about her appearance when Abigail started visiting more than once a day.

Apparently she always visited twice, once for her and once for him. That was what Abigail told him when he woke up two days ago, but both visits usually ended with Abigail speaking to Georgia a hefty amount.

It didn't upset him; it was refreshing to see Abigail with a friend and Will hoped that both girls were bonding over more than shared trauma at this point. Georgia told Will that she knew about Nicholas Boyle, which eased his mind a good deal. He only warned the two of them to watch what they say even in this place. Circles, even micro ones, had servants too. Abigail had understood his concern immediately and explained it to Georgia in hushed tones while he waited for her to come back (this was before he could stand). The rapid paling of the other young woman's face had concerned him, but the reason was enough to warrant the reaction.

"Looking and being aren't quite the same thing," the self-conscious Georgia finally replied, combing her fingers through her hair. She glanced over to the tray of herbs waiting for her consumption and sighed. "They said some of my illness isn't responding to any medication and that my emotions are running too hot to handle. Wynne has been resorting to magic again to keep me from backsliding, which is disappointing." A deep breath went through her body and she shook under its force. "Have you taken some of this stuff before?"

All of the herbs waiting for her were ones said to soothe the mind and calm thoughts. "Honestly I didn't think that I needed to before," Will replied and shifted in his standing position. Before… back when his emotions were something he understood and could examine. It was back when he could comprehend the world around him and its conventions without aid or worry from others.

"Before when?" she inquired, innocent in her curiosity. Innocence for a damning question.

He sighed, "Before now. Before this."

She tilted her head. "Did they say what's wrong with you?" Will quietly told her the negative and she snorted. "They won't find anything. Back when I was younger I used to get sick all of the time. Illness after illness, test after test. I think my immune system was so weakened because of the Dreamer thing, but I don't have any proof. No one could find the reason anything was wrong; they just knew that I was wrong." A glance around the room revealed no eyes or ears, so Georgia said, "I hope you don't have to stay here too long. Place gives me the creeps."

"Me too," he said. It was all he really could say. What else was there?

"It's nice that you and Abigail come to visit me. No one else does."

That was odd. "Really? No one?"

She nodded, then stopped halfway and contemplated something for a moment. "My mother came once, but she didn't speak to me. She just stared at me from across the room for a few minutes before leaving. Apparently the LeBeau's came as well. They couldn't bring themselves to even enter the room to see me. One of the servants said that they just hovered outside the door for several hours before leaving." Georgia gave a broken thing that could

barely be called a smile to him. “No one wants to see the person that murdered their daughter, no matter what was happening to them at the time.”

Mentioning the murder made it acceptable for him to bring up his next concern. Will sat on the bed slightly before speaking, “I heard that they’re going to try and do some small steps in the Fade. Maybe there is something there that can help you.”

“The Fade… help me?” Georgia laughed, tossing back her blonde hair. It sounded angry and raked through the air with bitterness. “So many times people have told me that they could help me with the Fade, with my dreams, with my memories. For so long, I believed them too. We Somniari are so foreign to modern mages; they have no idea how to handle us.”

“They really think that this would help you remember.”

“And what if I don’t want to?” she asked, begged really. “What if I don’t want to remember?”

He sighed, “You know what you did.”

She breathed shakily through the words, “I don’t remember it though. It all feels like some horrible dream where I killed my friend.”

“Just your friend?” Will asked, remembering Healer Sutcliffe. “No one else?”

“The only other thing I can remember dreaming was about you killing that spirit healer,” she replied and something struck him, inside. Will tried his best to hide just what this small revelation did to him, but it was hard to do. He was asleep during that… right? Beverly said there was no way he could have done it. Georgia trembled and drew the blanket around herself. Her eyes were looking into the distance, focused on something that he couldn’t see. “I couldn’t see your face.”

After some time, the curtain had been drawn back on Georgia’s portion of the healer’s ward and he had been left to his own devices. Only a small amount of time later, Will received a visitor that wasn’t Abigail (and that meant the visitor was actually for him, much to his amusement). Comte Lecter had heard of his waking and finally was available to come calling on his charge. The man looked extremely out of place when he arrived, dressed beautifully in the latest with brocade decoration as part of the suit of fabric armor he wore. Most of the people that he’d seen wore comfortable clothing or clothes that they didn’t mind getting dirty as this was a healer’s ward. It felt good to see that some things didn’t change, including the eccentricities of his sponsor.

Speaking of eccentricities, his Lordship brought him food from the mysterious outside world he was not allowed to return to. The Comte called for a small table and chair to be brought in so that he could sit next to Will’s bed and the elf wouldn’t have to get up for any reason. Will almost asked about what he was supposed to eat it on (if only to tease the older man), but was preempted by hannibal pulling out a container, two bowls, and some utensils. While Hannibal was setting up, Will peered inside the containers and saw that he had been brought soup.

“Smells delicious,” he genuinely remarked, enthused by the delighted reaction it got from his visitor. “I bet it tastes just as good.” Hannibal seemed to glow, even if only the corner of his

mouth moved.

“I brought you a dish commonly used when I was younger back in Nevarra, although I believe I was told that it came from Antiva. It is poultry, specifically a kind of chicken prized for its medicinal value. It is accompanied by a few fruits meant to be naturally sweet and important to wellness and some spices to clear the sinuses and push the body to heal itself.”

Will smiled, “Chicken soup?”

Hannibal hesitated, and Will was unclear if he was offended or simply caught off guard. Before Will could distinguish which and act accordingly, his Lordship said, “Yes.” It was spoken without any malice or real fight, so the brunette thought that it seemed safe. The noble began pouring the soup into both bowls and gestured for Will to begin eating, so he did.

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes, both enjoying the silent comfort of each other’s company. For as long as Will had known the man, his Lordship was careful with his words. It was something he appreciated about his sponsor. The fact that he now felt comfortable enough in the man’s presence that words weren’t required to enjoy his company relieved Will. After basking for a bit longer, Hannibal began their conversation: “The healer mentioned that you have been leaving the bed.”

Will blinked, unsure how exactly to respond. “I wasn’t aware that it was not allowed.”

“Not disallowed, but discouraged. You are still healing.”

He shrugged, “It was with purpose and good intentions.”

Hannibal hummed, “Was it for the young woman suffering from delusions? You are aware that, should both curtains be open and you both be present, you can speak to each other clearly without leaving the bed.” It was a statement of fact rather than a question.

“She’s been supporting me,” he replied and tried to keep any frustration out of his voice. It was too early to start an argument with his sponsor. That thought was a sobering reminder of his position in this relationship and the elf mentally backtracked slightly. “It’s hard to have a decent conversation when you have to yell at someone, especially when you would prefer some privacy.”

“It’s good that you have support, and I hope you are supporting her as well. There’s nothing more isolating than experiencing the world differently than others.” A few yards of room that felt like a mile could certainly complete.

He nodded, “Both Abigail and I have taken that up as our duty. Shared trauma, so to speak.” There was the dragon in the room that he was avoiding, so Will said it now. “I know that healer Sutcliffe was a friend, I’m sorry-”

Hannibal cut him off with a wave of the hand. “She didn’t murder Sutcliffe; her disease did. I can’t blame her for his death any more than you can be blamed for the way you stopped Gideon.”

His disease, the one that still afflicted him and probably not the one that Hannibal was referring to, was being treated at the moment. Would he have to deal with it for much longer? “Could this all have been the fever?”

“Possibly,” replied the noble, but his tone of voice screamed that he doubted it.

Will scrunched up his face. He didn’t like the idea that it wasn’t the fever; that it was something else or more. “What else is possible?”

“Fever can be symptoms of many things,” came from Hannibal and he said it so matter of factly. “When the mind or body is under a lot of stress, the body rises up to defend itself and harms whatever is in its path. This is your very self trying to warn you that it can no longer be ignored.”

Shifting in his seat on the bed, Will took a few more sips of the soup and steeled himself for something that he had been dreading to learn. “Does Jack know?”

“That this could be more than a fever? No. I haven’t told him.” Palpable relief flooded Will’s body. Jack was already extremely protective of him and learning something like this might cause the man to do something drastic. A still, small voice inside said that Jack not knowing was a bad thing. “Shouldn’t you?” Will asked, the quiet part pushing for an answer and sending off warning bells, while his louder part was trying to let it sit as it was.

“Not until we know for certain,” Hannibal replied and a little bit of him relaxed. His quiet part was satisfied with that answer. “What we must do now is support and monitor your recovery, carefully preventing as many relapses as we can.” His Lordship took a few of his own sips of broth before gesturing to the closed curtain with a curious look on his face. His head tilted slightly and he asked, “What about your young friend? How goes her recovery?”

Happy to move away from the topic, Will replied truthfully, “I don’t think she wants to; she’s terrified about remembering what she did.”

“Can’t say that I blame her. I know that I would hate to suddenly remember being a murderer.”

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“It’s a simple matter, really,” Freddie said as she placed outlines on the table in front of her. Abigail stared down at them, already not enjoying the pit in her stomach. The ginger bard was beyond nosy and every time that they met, she spent most of her ‘work’ trying to find connections or a lack thereof in Abigail’s truth. Freddie plopped down on the lounge in front of her and stared with dead blue eyes. “All you need to do is remember exactly what you were doing while your father was killing these girls one by one.”

Oh, Abigail remembered. Her father always kept the Red Tattler’s news on his activities, despite his limited ability to read. The titles of Lounds’ articles were heading each rough outline and she kept seeing them on her parents’ dining room table. She always prided herself on being fairly intelligent for her age and upbringing; it didn’t take long for her to realize what the little pamphlets were about. The sharp awareness of her father’s dark deeds and her

own part in it served to remind her that she was never free. In this way, Abigail envied her mama; at least in death this would all be over and her ignorance could be excused and turn instead to the living relative.

Abigail rolled her eyes up to Freddie, distinctly less than amused. The woman had much ego and little compassion as this was the fourth time this morning that she insinuated that Abigail was lying. To be fair, she was, but the ginger woman seemed to believe that Abigail was a part of her father's scheme in a way that implied revelry or enjoyment. The younger woman had no doubt that, should she not be involved in this process as directly as she had chosen, the ginger would have made more than a few bold accusations in her piece. Freddie placed several illustrations in front of her, all looking just like her with some small tweaks. A couple of the girls looked too much like her to actually be whom Freddie claimed they were, feeding into Abigail's opinion about what she was up to.

Nevertheless, the brunette cooperated, even when Freddie said things like: "We can use my pamphlet titles as the headings for each chapter while each one tells your story." Abigail was barely able to prevent herself from rolling her eyes. "If we get the timing just right, the later chapters will be published around the time that the original girl was taken." That smacked Abigail in the abdomen and it just occurred to her. Around this time last year, her father would have been getting antsy, irritated by her continued application for training in different shops. The first one had been such a singular encounter, but number two and three had followed in quick succession. In only a couple of days, he would go for number four, Brielle Fournier, while she was looking at baking.

Abigail swallowed, "What are we going to call it?"

A manic gleam entered Freddie's eyes, "I thought about 'The Last Victim', but apparently there is another serial on the market going by that title. Not a biography, but it certainly grabbed people's attention."

She crumpled slightly, exhaling as much negativity as she could manage. "Is it a bestseller?"

"Oh yes," Freddie replied, all too eager to share. "Especially after the guy who wrote it just killed himself."

Abigail tried to shake off the creeping dread this book was giving her and the nameless feelings she was avoiding that tasted too little and too much like guilt. "Just as well. Wasn't really my dad's last victim anyway," she declared and then looked for something to do with her hands.

"And who was that?" Freddie asked, tone carefully neutral. She would have to tread carefully here. Freddie had been doing well to make herself obvious and Abigail just now saw her game. By keeping her thoughts uncouth and loud, when Freddie was actively manipulating people felt like she was less of a threat. At least, the dumb ones felt that way.

Abigail gave the only answer that mattered to herself, "Marissa."

Freddie's response was slow and almost insulting, but Abigail could tell that she was trying to get Abigail to correct her or elaborate. "Marissa was killed by the copy. So was Cassie

Boyle."

"I still blame my dad!" shot from her mouth, bubbling from indeterminate frustration and rage. She quickly worked to tamp it down, but the words were already out there in the world, ready to be dissected.

"Blame him for Nicholas Boyle's death?" Freddie asked and Abigail glared.

"I blame Nicholas Boyle for Nicholoas Boyle's death. He killed Marissa. He got what was coming to him."

Pity was an expression that Abigail had never really associated with Freddie, but there it was on her face. "Nicholas Boyle didn't kill your friend," she said, and it was just the annoying kind of sad.

"Then who did?"

Freddie leaned back and crossed her legs, a smirk building on layer by layer. "I think a better question is who killed Nicholas. That boy was simply a dumb kid who was really messed up because his sister was murdered. He wasn't a killer." She stated it so matter of factly, not realizing that each word was a stab in the gut. No matter what she had thought or believed, someone thought that Nicholas Boyle was innocent. If he was…

Abigail had killed an innocent man. She was never in any danger from him. "How do you know?"

A shrug. "I met him and I've met enough killers to know what they look like and what gives them away."

"That being?"

The final layer was added and Freddie leaned forward, slightly getting into her space. "A very specific brand of hostility. I see it every time I look at Will."

Abigail protested, "I don't know if killing my dad means that he is a murderer."

"As far as I am concerned, that wasn't his only victim. Nicholas Boyle was murdered by Will too. He and Jack Crawford might as well have driven the knife in themselves. They told everyone that he was a serial killer and someone murdered him for it."

The pit sunk so low that it sprouted and began to grow back up her esophagus. "You really don't think that he did it." I killed an innocent man. I killed an innocent man. I-

Freddie nodded. "Whoever killed Nicholas Boyle killed an innocent man."

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Will had only been taken out for a few tests by Wynne. She had wanted a second opinion and called for another magical healer and a non-magical healer to look him over and see if they found anything else. He had been told that she couldn't find anything, but had the suspicion

that there was something else going on. The call of Georgia's words from earlier stuck in his head as, one-by-one, all of the healers told them that they couldn't find the root of his problems.

It was only supposed to be a few tests, but it ended up being half the day and another test. After a while, he began to wonder if they were just trying to keep him there. When the elf finally managed to return to the healing hall, all that he saw was chaos. The curtain that divided Georgia's space from the others was destroyed, ripped and bloodied. Where the young woman should have been laying were chunks of meat and blood. Split bones protruded from the flesh, giving the semblance of what was once a person. Will recognized the use of the Walking Bomb spell when he saw it.

Georgia… was dead.

He stepped closer, legs trembling slightly. There were plenty of people examining the room, but he barely recognized them until Beverly stepped into his vision. "Come here, Will," she ordered and he, dazed as he was, followed. His friend guided him to his portion of the room and sat him on the bed. She didn't demand that he lie down or anything, just gently (but firmly) pushed him to sit on it. Alana was there for some reason, following step for step behind. Beverly grabbed the other woman gently and pulled her away so the two could whisper in peace. Distantly he heard the others, which he now recognized as Jack, Brian, and Jimmy, all discussing the horrific scene in front of them.

"She was a mage. It would be a simple matter to do this herself," Brian argued and Jack put a hand up to silence him.

"Be that as it may, but there is a strong chance that this was accidental magic. She was Tranquil for a decade; she could not have been able to handle it," the bigger man counter-argued.

"Horrible way to die," Will whispered, but it drew the attention of every other person in the room, despite being a decent distance away. Jack looked meaningfully over at his portion of the ward and gestured for him to lay down, but Will silently refused. Instead, he stood and approached the crime scene, shambling along through the gore covered floor. "Suicide?"

Jack shrugged, "As much as I don't believe she could have controlled her magic, it could have responded to her desires in an unpredictable way."

Will was incredulous. "Blown apart to chunks?"

Brian butted in, "She was facing two murder charges."

Will waved him off and turned to Jack fully, doing his best to create the illusion of eye contact. "She wasn't suicidal Jack. She was sick and scared. When we spoke to each other-"

"You spoke to her?" Jack asked, irritated. "Why?"

Will shuffled in place and looked away, "I knew what she felt like."

Jack continued to stare “She tried to kill you.” Will nodded, but inside wasn’t so sure that was her goal. “She’s a murder suspect. You being friendly with her impacts our case against her.”

“That doesn’t really matter anymore, does it?” was his bitter reply and he finally left the ward. He needed some time away from this horror show.

Something startled him from his sleep. A soft clicking noise drew his attention and he awoke. After quickly sitting up, Will drew himself up and glanced around the room. There was nothing around for him to notice as his eyes slid from one object to another. Then, he backtracked. Staring at him from the foot of the bed was Georgia, eyes bloodshot and appearing as she had when he found her half dead. She smiled, and blood was coating her teeth and dribbling out of her mouth. Then, she turned, bones clacking and jolting through her skin as she moved out of the door of his shack.

Strangely, his shack was not the one that he lived in while in the Alienage. Instead, he was back in Red Crossing, in the shambling hut in the middle of the forest. Georgia walked out until she hit the edge of the copse, hovering around the treeline, mouth still etched into a smile.

“See?” the girl whispered to him, face relaxing. “See?” she asked again, with more feeling in it, like she was trying to convey something to him. A secret? Will reached out, but she backed into the forest and four antlers burst through her. Georgia arched back, propped up on the antlers jutting from her torso, before her skin began to peel and crack. Her body was expanding, coated in blood leaking from every orifice. As suddenly as she appeared, the corpse burst open and the halla from his nightmares emerged, still covered in the afterbirth of Georgia’s blood.

The stag tossed its head to and fro before rearing back on its legs. It charged.

Will woke still in his bed and looked over at the place where Georgia had slept. The curtains were gone, showing that the entire cot had been removed. Someone had come in and scrubbed the floor, but they weren’t able to remove all of the evidence of her passing.

Will laid still, very carefully not moving another muscle. He was trying to convince himself that if he stayed very still and didn’t move even when he thought to, that he would be proven wrong. His friend’s death and him needing to tell Abigail wouldn’t exist. Even as he hoped for this, he twitched a finger, proving to himself that he could still move of his own volition. This wasn’t a dream, much as he wished it. The young man rolled over on the cot, trying to face away from the offending space. His body screamed its soreness, but he didn’t care. What was a little pain in the face of grief and failure?

Closing his eyes, an earlier thought came back to him. He would have to tell Abigail. She didn’t deserve to be kept in the dark about something like this. Will had noticed how close the two were and had seen the intention behind the girl’s eyes. Loneliness was a powerful

thing, only made more potent when one was granted a reprieve, no matter how temporary. What's more, Will had a feeling that there was something more going on and Abigail could help him. He wasn't sure of the exact origin of this feeling, but it was there nonetheless.

He'd deal with it all tomorrow, when he went to tell her about Georgia. At the moment, he needed rest.

Feet trailing blood and mud from where he did not clean off his boots the previous day, Will shuffled into the grand Winter Palace, trailing the grit on the clean marble floors. At least two servants gave him an initial scandalized look before recognizing something on his face and hurrying away. He had slept in his clothes, and it hadn't been a good sleep (even after the nightmare). This was too important to give himself preparation time for; Abigail deserved to know.

What followed was probably one of the most difficult moments of his life, up there with the long period of time where he roamed the woods alone. Abigail looked so overjoyed to see him. She had greeted him enthusiastically and asked if he was well enough for an outing. The young woman mentioned having a picnic and seeing if there was a way that they could spend the day enjoying the sun and cool air. Spring had been in full force the last week and she was excited to experience it with him.

Smirking, Abigail teased, "I've heard from the others that elves are known for frolicking and dancing among the forests, so perhaps I could join you for this occasion."

Normally, Will would have smiled. Maybe, he would have joked back, made a comment about how dancing is reserved for the moonlight. He could have even agreed and done it anyway, both of them being silly. He didn't much get to be silly anymore; adolescence and adulthood took that from him. At this moment, Will didn't even have the heart to change his expression or feel her mirth. Grief was too all-consuming and it controlled his demeanor before he could change to reassure her.

"Will?" the younger brunette asked, looking increasingly perplexed. "What's wrong?"

"Da'len?" he began, trying to keep his own sorrow inside, but his words only made her worried. He didn't call her that often or even at all anymore. It was elven and kept aside for elves, but da'len was what she was to him. Abigail straightened and stared at him, waiting for his words that just weren't coming.

He couldn't say the words in Trade, not yet. "Da'len… Ir abelas." Abigail stiffened as well; she knew what those words meant. "Var Falon na'din." He gulped when she stared at him blankly. "Georgia is dead."

She remained rigid and didn't speak. Not a single noise came from her as she gazed vaguely in his direction, looking somewhere beyond him. They stood at their impasse for a few moments, neither daring to shake their stalemate. Then, Abigail finally looked at him, met his gaze. Will allowed her, knowing that this was vital. "I'm sorry," she said. "I need a little time." She turned and walked away.

The moment he arrived at the barracks, Jack bombarded him with mothering. “What are you doing here? Last time I checked, you were still sick. Get your ass back to the healers. Did you sleep? You don’t look like you slept.” The other four were surreptitiously staying out of the conversation, which gave him more than a few mixed feelings. Sure, no one wanted to get in Jack’s way, but usually someone would have defended him (typically Beverly or Alana). Did he look that bad?

Did they think that he needed it?

“I wasn’t doing anything worthwhile at the healer’s, as wonderful as Wynne was,” he replied.

“**Healing** is worthwhile, Will,” retorted Jack while giving him a massive glare. Will had assumed the man would be a little more excited to have him on the case, but apparently not. The bigger man gestured towards the door. “Go back.”

“I’m not feverish anymore!”

“I. Don’t. Care.”

Will tried to get in Jack’s space like the man usually did him, but it was significantly less effective. For one, he was about a foot shorter and half a foot thinner, which made his ‘presence’ a lot less intimidating. Also, the idea of pushing himself in Jack Crawford’s face seemed like a terrible practice right after he began and left him backing off halfway through. All the other man had to do was stare at him and not move a muscle. Decidedly less confident than was his intention, Will declared, “Georgia Madchen didn’t kill herself. What happened to her wasn’t an accident of magic gone wrong.”

Jack stared for a moment longer before turning his torso to the side. “Brian! Get your ass over here and check Will out.”

The Seeker protested, “Andraste’s ashes, Jack! I’m not a healer; I’m an alchemist.” Even still, Brian did as directed.

Will retreated from the other man slightly and turned to Jack. “She was murdered.”

Jack raised his hand and Zeller stopped, looking concerned between both men. “By whom?” Jack asked, still glaring.

“By whomever killed Donald Sutcliffe, the spirit healer,” he stated and tried to keep himself from sounding uncertain.

Brian chimed in, “We got some of the diseased skin like she had all over his body!”

“Like she had,” Will pointed out.

Zeller scoffed, “How many disease-ridden young women with their skin dying while still on their bodies have you met?”

“That doesn’t prove that she killed anyone!” Will pronounced, trying to speak over Jack, but was staying too quiet to yell.

“You didn’t know Georgia Madchen for a month. You don’t know what she was capable of,” Jack said and started to walk away to end the discussion.

“She did though,” Will replied, trying to keep the man from leaving. Jack didn’t stop, so Will walked alongside him. “She told me that someone else was there, but she couldn’t see his face.”

The Senior Seeker rounded on him, halting Will mid-step. “There was someone else there, Will. Sutcliffe. She couldn’t see his face, because she **cut it in half**.” He waved his hand vaguely about the room before pinching the bridge of his nose. “I understand that you are looking for an explanation, something to make this right.” One hand went to Will’s shoulder, a gesture meant to ground the elf in reality. “You need to step past her perspective and actually look, Will. Not everything can be made right.”

“No. It can’t,” Will replied, accepting of the fact, but he was still determined. Georgia deserved to have for her final moments to have some meaning beyond a report in another Seekers’s book somewhere, telling people of the dangers of mages. She deserved more than becoming a case study from young Templars to explore mages with instability. “There isn’t some magic phrase that will make this right. Something went wrong and we may never know what that was exactly. The wrong lived inside her and she fought it alone for so long, eventually tiring and asking to become Tranquil. Many more wrongs were done then, but she didn’t let them control her when she came back to herself. She kept fighting, even if it could only ever have been alone.”

Jack shook his head. “You can’t change that Will, especially not now.”

“This isn’t about change! All of her life, this young woman was misunderstood.” Will breathed, gathering what courage he could muster. He sent a quick prayer out to spirits of Valor, hoping against hope for aid. Something light filled him, he wasn’t sure what, but it gave him some strength. He declared, much to Jack’s irritation, “I am going to make sure that her death isn’t misunderstood. This wasn’t an accident.” A quick glance to the body pushed his face away once more. “She didn’t kill herself.”

“Then tell me this, Will,” Jack started. “How exactly did she manage to pull off that feat of magic? I already have both your and Wynne’s alibi confirmed and there aren’t really any other mages in the vicinity.”

“Coercion,” Will (slightly) guessed. “Maybe even a grenade or poison of some sort. Possibly an enchantment.”

Jimmy shuffled, “I did find this.” He held out several pieces of smooth stone. It was only remarkable because it was the only thing broken in the room besides the body and objects in the immediate blast radius of the spell. “I can’t guarantee anything, but it could be an overloaded runestone.”

“It’s the murder weapon,” Will declared at backed away slightly to keep his space. He put his back to the half-dwarf and focused on Jack. He could see Brian moving away to join Jimmy in looking at the potential enchantment. “Jack. Whoever killed Sutcliffe wanted to kill him almost how Georgia Madchen killed hers, but not exactly the same way. Georgia was only

trying to remove a mask and attacked LeBeau's face while Donald Sutcliffe was nearly decapitated."

The Seeker in question slumped, slightly resigned to the fact that he was needing to have this conversation. "So what? Madchen simply went a bit further the second time; killers often do. They like testing their limits and capabilities."

"No!" Will put a stop to that. "No. She was copied the exact same way as…" He stopped, a quiet assurance of the correctness of his thoughts ringing in his skull. "Just like the person that killed Marissa Schurr and Cassie Boyle wanted to kill like Garrett Hobbs did." Ravens cawed in the distance, distracting slightly. "But not exactly the same way." Two of the large black birds landed behind Jack Crawford, even indoors. One tilted its head slightly and let out a croaked bark of a laugh before fluttering away. The elf gulped, not liking this visit from one of Dirathmen's messengers. Which was it: Fear or Deceit?

"Hold on!" Jack said with a raised voice, still barely heard over the cawing of the raven's din. "Are you saying that Sutcliffe was killed by Garrett Hobbs' copycat?"

"So was Georgia." Will huffed slightly and wondered how he didn't see this sooner. "They think that she saw their face."

"Where does that leave us with Nicholas Boyle?"

Will swallowed. "I guess that leaves us with Nicholas Boyle not being the copy cat."

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Will's mind was leaping from point to point, jumping faster than it had in a long time; Jack could see the marks of each idle thought's passing on his face and demeanor. It reminded him so much of Will as he first saw him that the difference in him then and now struck Jack harder than it would have otherwise. Something **had** been happening, and he simply hadn't noticed it.

The question was what and what had changed to push his behavior back in the other direction. The easy question and answer was the fever, but a fever that long might've killed Will if it had been there the whole time. No, Jack had a feeling that there was something else lurking under the surface. So, he went to the person that should be able to give him answers or at least an approximation of them. Hannibal had been with Will for almost as long as Jack had him with the squad. The man, in Jack's experience, was highly observant. He had seen how Will worked at the beginning of this madness and had assured Jack that Will had been updating and speaking with him regularly. Luckily for Jack, Hannibal had also been visiting the little healer's unit to see Will consistently. So, when the noble came to visit Will next, Jack cornered him.

"We need to understand this. Will's never pointed me in the wrong direction before, but he's connecting murders that previously held no connection."

Hannibal's face was carefully impassive behind the ebony mask, at least as far as Jack could tell. It was farmed against his face and highlighted the inhumanness of his person's

cheekbones. A death mask. His Lordship's mouth almost seemed to move despite his face's utter stillness, "Beyond his involvement with them."

"Correct," Jack asserted. "Could it possibly be the fever? More than the fever?"

The head tilted and Hannibal carefully quirked the side of his mouth, forever inscrutable. "You're wondering if the lines are blurring or if he's onto something."

He kept his voice low to discourage eavesdroppers. "I'm wondering about all sorts of things."

Remarkably birdlike, his Lordship's head quickly tilted to the other side. "What do you believe, then?"

Jack slowly nodded, "There is evidence to suggest that her death was intentional, but Will acts like the evidence of something besides her inherent magic means that she couldn't have done it."

"That this woman was bested by madness and dreams. Will can't accept that she took her own life so that she wouldn't kill again."

"Why is that so hard to accept?" Jack asked, almost more to himself than to Hannibal.

The noble answered anyway. "If she could survive her reality, then he could survive his." He hesitated, then moved slightly further into a hallway, further away from even accidental overhearing. "I've learned recently that when he caught Abel Gideon, in his mind he was killing Garrett Hobbs. Again."

"Huh," Jack laughed slightly, mirthless. "Hobbs. And how is Will's relationship with Abigail these days?"

Hannibal sighed through his nose and looked away. "Complicated."

Jack moved his head closer and Hannibal turned back. "There are three deaths in the Garrett Hobbs case that have yet to be solved. The third was our only suspect in the first two."

His Lordship sort of startled. There was an abrupt movement that was quickly reigned in. Jack narrowed his eyes and the nobleman said, "Nicholas Boyle? Will believes his murder is connected to the others?"

"No," Jack stated very slowly. "He hasn't said anything about Nicholas Boyle, beyond him not being the murderer, especially considering the fact that he's declared Marissa Schurr and Cassie Boyle were the deaths of an as-yet uncaught killer. He isn't even asking questions."

A swallow. "I hesitate to ask, but what questions should he be asking?"

Jack's stare and suspicion was only interrupted by a single prolonged blink. "The same kind that I've been asking about Abigail Hobbs."

"You think that Will's protecting her."

The Seeker nodded. “Naturally. Has been since the moment he burst in and killed her father to prevent her death. I just don’t know from what.”

Hannibal was quick to say, “I can’t imagine that he would hide anything criminal from you. I’ve only known our young friend as a man striving to be his best self.”

“In the grand scheme of things, you haven’t known him very long and neither of I. What we do know of him says that Will hasn’t been himself in a long time.” The more he said, the more confident that Jack felt in the sentiment.

Hannibal argued with him, “He needs our support, no matter how much self that he maintains. It is vital that we let him keep it.”

“Unfortunately, Will’s mind works so differently from everyone else’s that traditional support won’t work this time,” he declared before leaving the nobleman to visit Will. Hannibal was being remarkably tightlipped about Will where he had been a little looser in the tongue before. Jack was more sure than ever that something was happening, something big, and he was being kept out of the loop. There was a card that he hadn’t tried to pull yet in this game of Wicked Grace, but it appeared that now was the time. Better to get answers than not.

Whatever the case may be, Jack needed to understand the circle of people that had found themselves in the Hobbs’ kitchen all those months ago, even the deceased Garrett Hobbs. Their ghosts had been circling one another and Jack was left outside and trying to peer in. He was going to need a little more aid, and that would require enlisting someone with insight into the most enigmatic of the group.

Jack Crawford may be more tangentially involved in the politics of Orlais, vis-a-vis Bella and his higher position amongst the Chantry, but even he had heard of the mysterious Baroness Bedelia du Maurier. The woman had not left Halamshiral since the year before Miriam Lass disappeared. Despite her absence, the Baroness had managed to remain an influential and sometimes spiteful player of the Game. So, naturally, everyone knew the rumors that she had been tutored by the Dowager herself. Both women had neither confirmed nor denied these claims, which benefited them both. Jack knew from Hannibal that the Comte and her Ladyship were old peers, as close as one could get in the Game to friends really. If that was the case, perhaps the Baroness could provide the understanding he needed about his Lordship’s behavior as of late.

The Seeker stood at the front of her Halamshiral residence for ten minutes before she deigned to receive him. He had the distinct feeling that, under normal circumstances, she would have made him wait longer or refused him outright. As it were, when he entered she was already drinking. The bottle and aroma suggested something exquisitely expensive, probably an Antivan or Tevene vintage. Her Ladyship quickly gulped the glass she was drinking just as he made his presence known and poured another, sipping this one.

Well then.

Honestly it was done so brazenly that he wondered if it was a ploy. It wouldn’t have been the first time a noble acted drunk so that they could deny any culpability in whatever happened.

He bowed slightly, as befitting his rank to hers. “Baroness du Maurier. How kind of you to receive me.” Jack rose, but kept his head in a polite incline until she greeted him in return with a slight bow of only the torso. No full curtsy, but he didn’t mind. “I am sure they announced me at the door, but I still feel I must introduce myself. I am Seeker Jack Crawford and I would like to speak with you about a peer.”

She glanced at his armor and waist, checking for swords or any hidden weapons. “Is this Chantry business?”

“Not at the moment, Madame, but it might become it,” he replied and glanced around the room. It was nicely furnished, several plush chairs and small lounges, which gave away that he was in the parlor or another room for entertaining. “May I sit?” Jack asked and her Ladyship gestured with her wine-filled hand to the nearest seating arrangement. “Please.” She remained standing.

Lady du Maurier took a couple of steps towards the window, moving so that the sun blocked out some of her features. He noticed that her mask covered only the barest part of her cheekbones and eyes before going up her forehead and intertwining with jewels in the crown of her hair. As far as masks went, it was fairly open, but her face remained stoic. “This is not an official inquiry, then.”

He smiled, trying to be as non-threatening as possible. “As I said, not yet. I wouldn’t want to ruin anyone’s reputation unnecessarily.” She stiffened. It was subtle, but he noticed the way the moving beams of light abruptly stopped swaying and the shadows moved with a change in posture rather than the sun.

“Whose reputation might that be?” she asked, barely more than a whisper.

“As I said, I was coming here to ask about a peer. I believe that Comte Lecter may be withholding pertinent information involving a murder investigation.”

He saw her blink, just twice, through the holes of her eyes. “He hasn’t confided with the Seekers of Truth, so you were hoping that he would speak with an old fellow student.” She gestured towards him with her wine glass. “And you’re hoping that I’ll tell you.”

He smiled. “Yes, Madame.”

Bedelia looked away and moved from the window back towards the wine bottle. Her glass wasn’t empty yet, but she seemed like topping off was more for something to do rather than actually needing the wine. The Seeker tried to reassure her, “I don’t believe that his Lordship is a dangerous man, no more than any other noble at least, but I am concerned about his relationship with his protege. An elf named Will.”

She resolutely poured the glass and did not look at him, “It is not my place to discuss an old peer, especially regarding his private life. Secrets are valuable in Orlais, Seeker Crawford, and I won’t be giving any away with incentive.”

Her lack of cooperation would be easily dealt with. If she wanted recompense, he would give it in his own way. “Of course. Since we cannot discuss Comte Lecter, why don’t we discuss

you." Her eyes glanced at him from the bottle, less than happy at wherever his insinuation would lead. "You had a protege of your own, did you not? He attacked you. I read the report. Comte Lecter even gave a statement."

Barely imperceptible, but the Baroness clenched the inside edge of her bottom lip between her teeth. "Comte Lecter had been working with him before the two separated."

"Comte Lecter thought Monsieur Franke would work better with you?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"And Monsieur Franke almost killed you?"

Du Maurier put the bottle and glass down and then turned to him, slowly. Looking him steadily in the eye, she stated, "He swallowed his tongue while he was attacking. It's the only thing that saved my life."

Jack smirked slightly before reigning it in, seeing a falsehood, but not having the actual motivation to call it out. There had been plenty of evidence that the man had attacked her. However she managed to solve the problem, it had been in self-defense. "Thank the Maker for small favors."

Glancing longingly back at the wine, her Ladyship replied, "Yes. Thank the Maker."

He stood, moving closer but working to stay out of her space. She was spooked enough to talk, but if he moved from intimidating to threatening, surely her Ladyship would clam up. "You are aware that Comte Lecter was attacked by a fellow noble during an incident involving Lord Froideveaux."

"Very sad. We of the Orlesian Court still mourn the loss." She didn't seem to be grieving very much and most of the Court had a party only a day or so after. Granted, seeing mourning now is a bit much to ask since the death was about a month and a half ago, but still. "Nice move, though, forcing me to have to defend or not defend the Comte."

"He's had some interesting relationships over the years. Usually fairly complicated and more than one have involved those that he's sponsored at some point."

"Many of us find solace in complicated proteges. They keep us on our toes and give us the challenges we crave."

"Does he usually defend them so fiercely?" he asked.

Bedelia turned back to the wine and kept her back to him. "That depends on what kind of challenge he gave Hannibal. Of course, he speaks of Will more as a friend rather than a protege."

"Would he defend a friend so fiercely?"

Her voice, muffled by distance and direction, came to him. "Comte Lecter does not have many of them, so I imagine he would be loyal. I know he is concerned about his young friend

and very much wants to help him."

"I want to help him too," Jack replied, admittedly slightly offended. "I consider Will a friend."

She turned back once more, wine in hand. "It seems to me that young Will could use more friends like Comte Lecter," she said and took a decent-sized sip of her wine.

With that small nugget of information, definitely more valuable than gold, Baroness du Maurier politely kicked him out. Her Ladyship would probably say 'dismissed' but they both knew what it really was. Regardless, some things had been made a little clearer for him. Hannibal is protecting Will, and Will….

Will is protecting Abigail. But from what? Why?

This was all going back to Garrett Hobbs. Jack was sure of it at this point. If only he could grasp what exactly was the missing piece from that original case, he was sure that the rest of this would fall into place. Unfortunately, Jack's intuition was telling him that Abigail was involved and Will was protecting Abigail, very likely that protection was from whatever the missing piece was. If he was going to get answers this time, it was going to be without the elf there.

Jack got back to the barracks, met with Jimmy and Brian. Will, Beverly, and Alana were all conspicuously missing. Now that every person on the team with a relationship with Abigail Hobbs was currently not here, this procedure could hopefully go smoothly.

He stood in front of them, both at attention for this assignment. On a table in front of them were rough sketches of all of the murders that Will attributed to the copy. "Will claimed that the Copy killer had some connection with Garrett Hobbs, probably some personal insight into his life. He believed that they may have met, known each other." He paused for emphasis. Just because he was a Senior Seeker of Truth did not disallow him his dramatics. Rivaini he may be, but his heart was always in Antiva. "They may have even killed together."

"Of course he got all that just by looking at a body," Brian snarked.

"We're calling it a claim. Seems more like a guess. Claims require evidence," continued Jimmy.

Jack rolled his eyes. "Let's play a little game, shall we? I have an answer, which is that all of these were killed by the same person and that this person has a connection to Garrett Hobbs. Now, you need to ask the right questions."

Brian pouted at him, "Do we have to try and go in the Fade? I don't speak spirit."

"Knowing you, you're more likely to bring a demon upon us. I'll bet that it'll be a Sloth too."

"Hey!"

So he was wrong. Without his second here, her very small connection to Abigail be damned, things fell very quickly into chaos. "Where's Beverly?"

“Family thing!” Brian said, very quickly. Jimmy nudged him with his arm.

“Family thing,” Jack repeated, trying to make clear how dubious he thought the excuse was. “Is Alana with her?”

Jimmy glanced at Brian before answering, “Maybe…”

The Senior rolled his eyes and glared at both of them. “Get her over here as soon as possible. In the meantime, I need you to pull up all of the statements that we had, all of the work we’ve done on the Hobbs case. I mean everything. Someone also needs to subtly interview about her among the Court and see if she’s let anything slip.”

“Yes, Seeker,” both said and prepared to divvy up the tasks. In response, Jack pinched the bridge of his nose, praying that the Maker would relieve his stress headache. This was getting more and more complicated. He would need to get to work as well if they were going to get to the bottom of Abigail Hobbs.

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Abigail found herself alone in the suite, once again. Unlike a little over a month ago, she was allowed to come and go as she pleased now. At the moment, however, she didn’t want to. One of her best friends in the whole world, as new as that friendship was, was dead. There was nothing that she could do. The last time a friend had died, Abigail had been haunted by Marissa for weeks. They had grown up together and used to know the worst things about each other.

Marissa had taught her how to braid her hair while her mother still wanted her to wear it down. Marissa had told her about boys and sex and all of the things involved. They were both only children really, so both of them had mused about making each other their honorary sisters, someone their children could call aunt. Marissa wouldn’t have understood though. Towards the end of the friendship, the entire situation with her father had tainted Abigail. She was ruined as a person. He had made her a part of something unforgivable and, despite being dead when it happened, had taken away Marissa from her too.

Georgia had understood. They had met a couple of times a day to talk about life and what it meant to go on after being a monster. She knew about guilt and wanting to be better than you were for others. They were both murderers, in their own way. Abigail was trying to help Georgia learn to deal with her feelings when the young girl became caught up in something small. She couldn’t imagine living for a decade without emotions or a personality, but she did know what it was like to have to bottle it in tight and keep it hidden away. Georgia helped with her humor and wit. She also taught Abigail about magic a little different from Will’s and told the strangest stories. The blonde girl had distinctly reminded Abigail of Will in a number of ways, but was still her own person. Now, she was gone too.

How long did Abigail still have? She didn’t know anymore. A more than small part of her longed for a life where she had never been harmful to anyone. Maybe she would never have had her father. Maybe her mother would have left and never gone back. What if Will and Alana were her parents? What if Hannibal was? What if she had never murdered Nicholas Boyle?

The thoughts stung more than they should have, because the young woman could sense something coming. Whatever it was wasn't clear, but it couldn't be much longer now. A pinnacle was arriving, and Abigail wasn't sure whether she would survive the fall out.

She came to his home this time.

Will hadn't seemed quite sure what to do with Abigail in his little house in the Alienage, almost like he forgot the many times he had hosted her back in Red Crossing. So much of their time spent together in Halamshiral had been in Hannibal's suite or partially neutral territory. At the very leasts, it was neutral for the two of them. She figured she owed him this. Here, there were no spies, no scheming nobility, and no expectations. Not anymore.

Abigail still held onto her secrets, but this was the penultimate moment before the drop. She knew she would be telling him about her role in her father's murders soon. It was inevitable, but she wanted him to love her a bit longer. He may not expect anything of her, but that didn't mean she couldn't wound him in ways beyond disappointment. For now, they had the warm glow of the fire in a shack on the edge of civilization, just them and seven Mabari hounds. It almost felt like home.

They didn't hug. The need for that kind of comfort from each other hadn't really manifested itself. If they had ever hugged each other, Abigail didn't remember it at that moment. She guessed that he didn't either. Too much distance, but it was growing smaller. The weight of what she learned today about Nicholas Boyle (that she now knew he was knowledgeable of as well) and their shared grief of Georgia bonded them together. Instead of physical touch, the pair hovered in each other's proximity. They sat facing one another on plush cushions on Will's floor, the Mabari creating a warm cocoon. Leaning towards each other, they spoke in hushed tones.

"You once told me," Abigail paused and gathered breath. "You once told me that killing was the ugliest thing in the world."

Will rolled his eyes, but not in exasperation at her. He seemed more like someone that was frustrated with his more naive self, having seen more ugly than just killing. "One of them, I suppose."

Her voice was wetter than she wanted, and she still whispered, almost as if she was afraid someone would hear. In a way, the young woman supposed that she was, despite their distance from any other people. "I think I finally get it. I thought there was something wrong with me after I killed Nicholas, because I didn't feel ugly when I did it." Abigail stared at him, daring him to ignore her like he once did when she made him uncomfortable. "If felt good. That's why it was so easy to lie about it."

Will avoided eye contact with the younger, but she didn't force it. He was still looking at her, and that was more than he used to do. "It was like you had done nothing wrong."

Strange wording. "Did you feel like you were doing something wrong when you were killing my dad?"

The elf looked at the human girl with sad, big eyes and shook his head. His voice let out a soft little, “No.” She didn’t respond. It sounded like he had more to say. “I was terrified. It didn’t matter that I had shot vital spots with a crossbow; he wouldn’t go down. I thought he was never going to die. Then, I let my magic out, and he dropped. Then... I felt powerful.”

“I imagine that it would feel that way to crush him into the ground,” Abigail mused and tried to keep herself from sounding wistful. She didn’t succeed, but Will didn’t seem overly concerned. “Do you still feel powerful?”

Shaking his head, Will admitted, “Now? I just feel confused.”

She didn’t feel powerful anymore. “I feel ugly now. Tainted. You were right; it is one of the ugliest things in the world… when you’ve killed someone who didn’t deserve to die.” Abigail was crying and several Mabari heads nudged and leaned on her. Drool and slobber was coating her dress, but she didn’t care. Hannibal would be disappointed in her, but it already had fur and mud on it. Plus, she was able to lean against them and allow their warmth and unwavering love to wash over her.

Will broke out of his brief train of thought. “You thought he was a killer.”

She shook her head against the fur, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “When I killed him, it felt like I was killing my dad. I was getting to end it. To stop him.” A sob punctured her chest. “I thought I got away from him.”

Will leaned forward, moving from the cushion to his knees in front of her. He placed his hand on her shoulder, allowing more warmth to seep through. Contact through the previously taboo space. “Neither of us have been able to get away from your father,” he told her and the truth of it gutted her.

She swallowed, trying to get saliva back in her dry mouth. The tears had stolen it from her and made her entire face sore and puffy. “I still see him sometimes. In dreams. Sometimes I wish I had killed him. For killing my mom and all of those girls. For making me…” She stopped herself. Abigail knew she couldn’t tell him, not yet. Not when they were both so vulnerable.

Still, he picked up on it, her defender. Of course he would. “Making you what, Abigail?”

What kind of excuse? “Part of it.” That much was true. “Part of any of it. This wasn’t supposed to be my life! There may be many great gifts given to me, but it’s hard to really have anything isn’t it? Even though he’s gone, even though I have this great life ahead of me now, it still feels like my dad’s out there, just waiting.”

“Damn slippery life,” he whispered, mostly to himself. “In a way, he still is.”

“The Copy?” Abigail asked and Will nodded.

“Georgia’s murderer too. I’m almost positive that he killed the healer and framed her for it. Then, when he got the first opportunity he killed her too.”

Before he could say more, Abigail stood up from the hounds. Several of them whined and butted against her legs, but she maintained her poise and looked down at him. She needed to do this then, for Georgia, for Nicholas, for Will, and for herself. “Don’t say anything else. I want to help you catch him.”

Will smiled, but it was pained. He didn’t want her with him, but too bad. They were doing this together or she would find a way to do it on her own. For all of the grief this man gave her and for the death of her friend, he would pay. Something in his face changed and looked fairly resigned. “Pack your things Abigail. We’re going back to Red Crossing.”

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Beverly and Alana sat together, minding their own business really. Yesterday, Will had flitted in and out of the barracks so quickly that they scarcely knew what had happened. Both women were mourning privately, in their own way, but they weren’t quite in the same state as their friend and his young (self-imposed) ‘ward’. They had gone together to ask Jack for some leave time and the man had idly agreed, too caught up in something to be paying attention. Fortunately, both of their Seeker peers had heard and gave them the thumbs up to continue about their business.

It was a strange feeling, grieving for someone they barely knew. The disconnect was palpable. They were grieving for Will and Abigail, for the Georgia they had heard about and the future that was gone. The natural entropy that came with the chaos of life, breaking everything down in its path. Luckily, that kind of destruction usually gave way for something new.

They weren’t together in the romantic sense. Beverly wasn’t ready for that kind of relationship and Alana needed her boundaries, to keep work and pleasure separate. Hell, the boys probably thought they were sexually involved, but it wasn’t that either. They were finding solace and a confidant in one another, enjoying the simple pleasure of each other’s company. Beverly had declared Alana to be her best friend to her entire family with said woman present and very uncomfortable with the attention it garnered her. To them, she might as well have been a long lost daughter or a new daughter in law. Honestly, she was just happy to be in the home of a large and loving family such as the Katz.

In the comfort of the hearth and the bleeding quiet of the night, both women sat. Under the stars, they rested peacefully. While things were not alright and death would constantly be at the door for the rest of her life, Alana knew that here there was something of a reprieve. The violence of the day could be dealt with tomorrow.

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The house was quiet for the night. Alana was busy with Seeker Katz and Abigail was visiting Will at his home, which left Hannibal with nothing to do. His next party was distant enough away that killing would leave the meat rotting. He didn’t enjoy salting it; the taste was often affected and did not prepare as well. To entertain himself, the nobleman decided that another visit to Bedelia was in order.

The Baroness was not pleased to see him and made no bones about making it known for once. Usually she kept her resentment in reserve, but something must have perturbed her enough that her inhibitions were lowered. She escorted him to the parlor and quickly poured some of the decanted wine waiting for her. Idly, he smirked at the fact that she had been drinking more lately. Not usually something that he preferred, but in such a quantity it was a sheer tell that the stress was getting to her. After taking his own glass from her hands, the clearly irritated hostess rounded on him. “A Seeker of Truth came to see me,” she said, voice carefully flat but still just as accusatory. “He asked me questions about your relationship with your protege, Will.”

Only one Seeker that Hannibal could think of would be in the state of mind to ask such things. “Jack Crawford was here?” If he was honest with himself, it was not much of a surprise. The man was brimming with suspicion the last time that they spoke.

“You’re not surprised,” she said, rather deadpan.

“Of course not. He voiced his suspicions about my ward to me and probably suspects that Will is trying to protect her.”

“Since he came asking to verify what you said about your protege, he must also suspect that you are in turn protecting Will. Are you?”

Hannibal narrowed his eyes a millimeter at Bedelia. Her face did not change. “How are you asking?”

Bedelia was, as ever, the cunning politicker. “If you feel the need to answer my question in such a manner, I feel like I already have mine. If you must know, I will step out of my role for a moment as your peer and speak to you as your… friend.” The last words came through a grimace. She was lucky that there was no one around to see her reaction; part of her prominence came from her unreadable expression with only the barest of masks. Even now, it was no more than strings of small jewels lining her forehead and draping across the cheeks. Such pronounced emoting would cause a flurry of pushes in the Game. Her eyes, green in this light, simply glowered. “Whatever you think you are doing with Will **stop**.”

“He needs my help.”

“The kind that comes with a cost.”

Hannibal pushed through, mostly ignoring her thoughts on the matter. “He needed a friend. I am his friend.”

“You cannot create a friendship with a man disconnected from the concept as a man disconnected from the concept,” she rebutted.

“I am protecting him,” Hannibal admitted aloud. “But it is from influence. What he believes about himself and what makes him who is is inherently flawed. He requires an agent outside of himself to help him reach understanding and certainty.” ‘My certainty’ Hannibal did not say.

“What makes you believe that you are able to ‘help’ him achieve this?” she asked.

“I am upfront and honest with him.” She scoffed. “I’m not comfortable telling Will that my very best attempts to help him may fail and that my loyalty to him and his treatment could be compromised,” he explained. What she believed that meant was between herself and the Maker.

“You can easily tell him something else. Your Seeker asked about my attack,” Bedelia snarled, trying to pull on the persona that came with the title of Baroness. In front of peasants and lesser nobles, it may have worked. It never did on him.

Hannibal breezed, “I see. What did you tell him?”

Poor Bedelia. She looked like she swallowed a particularly sour lemon. “Half-truths. I gave the simplest explanation, but did not tell him how or why or who was responsible.” Sighing, she continued, “You must accept that you have limitations, difficult as that may be.” Hannibal resented that. He was very aware that he had limitations to what he could do in the world, but it was subverting those limitations that would remain the sweetest of nectars.

So, he did not speak. Nevertheless, his silence was taken as permission or prompting for her continued lecturing. “You have to maintain boundaries.”

In the deadest voice he could muster, Hannibal replied, “When the pressures of my personal and professional relationships with Will grow too great, I assure you I’ll find a way to relieve them.”

Eyes, now grey, widened beneath the draping beaded gems. He relished in her fear and knowledge of the potential of those words, even if she didn’t know what they could potentially mean. It was times like these that he loved visiting Bedelia. He got to keep his secret and his power.

The next morning struck Hannibal in the gut. Will was bright-eyed and bushy tailed, a determined spring in his step where he had achieved some kind of clarity. A small insistent part of Hannibal sunk quickly out of sight as he considered the meanings behind his words and the implication of that. Will achieving clarity, here and now when the situation has become increasingly delicate, was of grave danger to him. The killer had to take great pains to not show weakness in the face of a partially restored adversary.

His eyes tracked its newly confirmed prey as it entered the den. Will was in his own head, concentrating on whatever his mind had fixated on. Hannibal would need to tread carefully if this was going to work. Too much was riding on his relationship with the young man and his freedom was not something he felt like gambling away.

“I’m much better now. I feel clearer. I know you doubted it earlier, but I’m sure it had to be the fever,” Will declared. If only the young man knew how wrong he was. It wouldn’t change anything, but Hannibal would have the satisfaction of his panic.

“Spirit Healer Wynne contacted me and told me that you had no intention of returning, against her better judgement.” In fairness to him, she actually did. Someone had told her that

he was his sponsor and she practically demanded that he do something to get the young man to return to her care.

“She gave me plenty of medicinal herbs and advice,” he retorted. “I’m much better use trying to find Georgia’s murderer than stuck in a healing ward’s bed.”

Hannibal projected the image of the disappointed sponsor, trying to make his young protege see reason. The elf sat down in a chair at his behest, but still seemed just as twitchy as before. This entire conversation would help determine the noble’s approach to the situation. He needed to see what kind of state of mind Will was heading towards at full speed, now that some cogent thought had returned to him. In the meantime, he needed to disapprove of his reckless behavior without necessarily discouraging it, less he seemed suspicious. “Leaving the halls of healing to find the murderer of a murderer that allegedly commit suicide, and furthermore doing it against the wishes of your healer and your sponsor? Will, these are not the actions of someone who is thinking clearly.”

“Fine then!” Will waved his hand dismissively and avoided eye contact with the blonde. “Just thinking clearly about the copy murderer then.”

“The murders that you have attributed to the copy all have suspects with good evidence,” he explained, as patient as he could.

Will didn’t seem to care. His lack of oppressing illness (in his own mind at least) loosened his tongue and granted him bravery bordering on brashness. “So what?”

Admittedly, not the first time he had double-taken with Will, but certainly one of the more dramatic ones. Hannibal didn’t even have to act surprised; it was written all over his body language (if not his face). “You’re choosing to ignore them?”

The mage glared at the wall past his head. “What I’m not ignoring is that both of those suspects are dead. Nicholas Boyle was convenient and Georgia…” He paused. “Georgia followed me to the healing halls when I went to see Sutcliffe again. She must’ve witnessed his murder and saw them.”

This wasn’t what Hannibal wanted. Will was connecting the dots far too quickly. He wanted to be seen, but not for these copy murders, a facsimile of his true work. Elevating what already has been done held no interest for him. He had moved beyond that. Still, it was thrilling to hear him speak. Despite himself, Hannibal was entranced. “Why not kill her then and there?” he asked.

Will took in that thought and generated another with ease. “Must’ve not had the time. Georgia was an unreliable witness and that bought him some. People already thought she was a killer, so it was easy to pin it to her.”

“Then why not just leave it at framing?”

The elf furrowed his brows. “He wasn’t planning on framing her. He was planning on framing me.” Not quite, but planting the seeds for when he eventually would. Hannibal would give him the slight difference. He lacked the overall scope and framework to see his

plan and Hannibal had been careful to not make Marissa Schurr (and even Cassie) personal enough to warrant suspicion.. “You believe this is personal,” he stated more than asked. They both knew that was exactly what Will was saying.

His conversation partner practically growled, “If it wasn’t before, it is now. There will be evidence. I’ve found a pattern and now I’m going to reconstruct his thinking.”

“How do you intend to do that?”

Will steeled himself, bracing for impact. “That’s what I came to tell you. Last night, Abigail and I decided that we were going back to Red Crossing. She wants to find Georgia’s murderer as much as I, and that was where the copy killer started. With Garrett Hobbs and Cassie Boyle.”

This was news to him. Abigail had not even hinted at wanting such a thing. “What? Will, no. This is absurd. I’m not allowing you to pull Abigail into your delusion.”

“It’s not a delusion and I didn’t ask Abigail to do anything. She volunteered and I’m not going to force her to stay behind. It’s important that she comes with me.”

“Will-”

The young man stood up. “This is not a delusion. I am awake and this is real.”

Abigail appeared in the doorway, holding a bag with enough supplies for a month’s travel. He stared at her, forcing her to look away from his gaze. “I’m going with Will,” she spoke to the room and went to his side. “This is important to me, your Lordship. She was my friend and I’m going to avenge her.”

In the end, he was forced to watch them go. This was a minor upset to his plan, but could work in his favor. Now all he needed was for Jack Crawford to notice that Abigail and Will were gone and he could put everything into motion. It was **much** sooner than he would like, but he couldn’t afford to wait any longer. Will was putting everything together and too much longer would land Hannibal at the noose.

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“Jack!” Brian shouted, thrilled by his new revelation. “Jack!” he shouted again and this time the Senior Seeker heard his squad member. Jack turned to Brian, who was out of breath and barely standing. If the man actually decided to run to greet him, clearly there was something of actual import being imparted.

“Yes, Brian?” The younger Seeker held his hand up, quietly asking for a moment to collect himself. Jack allowed him that. Eventually, Brian stood up straight and cleared his throat a couple of times before addressing his elder. “I have found some information that you requested. A few servants had been spying and listening in on Georgia Madchen and Abigail Hobbs conversing.”

“And?” Jack pushed for Brian to continue. For an ‘alchemist’, the man enjoyed his dramatics. Now was not the time.

“They didn’t give me much, but they did confirm something. Abigail Hobbs was, at the very least, aware of what her father was doing and felt responsible for it. They suggested that she may have helped him by speaking with the victims prior to Garrett Hobbs going after them.”

The Senior closed his eyes, a realization and irritation dawning. “She was gathering information.”

Brian shrugged, “She did mention that she was looking for an apprenticeship. Perhaps that was the guise that they went under. She could have been helping him.”

Jack shook his head. “As much sense as that makes, we only have conjecture from information given by servants. That’s not enough to bring Abigail in for the murder of Hobbs’ victims.”

“What if those aren’t the victims we need to be concerned about?” Jack felt a pit growing in his stomach, something boiling in the recesses of his belly. He had a strong feeling that he knew where Brian was going and wouldn’t like what that meant.

“The Copy could be a family connection.”

If the Copy was family to Garrett Hobbs, if Abigail was the Copy, then that meant Will had to know. He was so quick to point fingers in every direction… No. That didn't work. Will didn’t think that Abigail was the copy or he wouldn’t be bringing that into the forefront. Jack had a good feeling that his avoidance of speaking about Nicholas Boyle’s murder was indeed to protect Abigail, but anything else would be simply unlike him. “So Boyle might not have been the first,” he muttered, leaving Brian to give him a strangely fascinated look. “She was inspired by her father. She killed the Boyle girl to impress dad and then Marissa Schurr in memoriam. Nicholas Boyle was to cover her tracks.”

“Why kill Sutcliffe or the Madchen girl?”

Jack paused; that did seem to break it. Then again, he had no doubts that she would have found out about Will’s appointment with the healer and taken the opportunity to strike. Madchen was a liability, someone that knew, even on an unconscious level. Will introduced them, which would give her the perfect opportunity to get in the young woman’s good graces and then strike when people weren’t there. Maybe she spoke with Georgia to get whatever is brewing out of her system. No matter what, there was a motive that was certain. “She’s either got a taste for it or she wants to impress someone new.” If the pattern was anything to go by, Jack had a feeling he knew who that someone was.

Unfortunately, when Jack managed to get into Comte Lecter’s suite to speak with the young woman, a very different person was there. This person was someone he was much less looking forward to speaking with. Sitting in the parlor was a very amused Freddie Lounds, wild red curls framing her smirking face. Her clothes were as tacky as ever, which only made her stand out in the cool jewel tones of the room.

“Hello, Seeker Crawford,” she spoke through painted lips, teeth standing out sharply behind them. Her presence here only made his frustration at the circumstances worse.

“The Red Tattler,” he returned to her and she grinned.

“You look like you’re here to arrest someone. Is it Abigail or Will?”

What was he doing? “Will was here?” Jack understood that he felt responsible for her, but now was not a good time to be seen with a suspect. The young man wouldn’t be able to do anything as part of this investigation. He was genuinely too close to be impartial.

“So it was Abigail,” she breezed, expression serene like a cat with the canary. Honestly, they should just make her leave. Bards never brought anything but trouble.

“Where is she?” he asked, stressing each individual word.

The bard lounged in the chair, spread out in the luxury of someone else’s belongings in someone else’s home. “I asked a few of the servants why she wasn’t meeting our normal appointment time. Apparently, Will snuck little Abigail out. Don’t know why he thought he needed to be sneaky or that it would mean Comte Lecter wouldn’t notice.”

He rolled his eyes. Now she was just stalling. “Did anybody say where they were going? I know you asked.”

“Nope,” she said, popping the word in her mouth. “They didn’t tell anybody where they had gone. Honestly, I wondered what they were up to, but since you came here to arrest Abigail, I’d say it’s no good.”

She looked so smug that he had to tear it down a little. “How about your exclusive? Is it going well?”

The grin only barely avoided becoming a grimace, thanks to Freddie’s gritted teeth. “There’s some plot holes,” she spat.

“Plot holes are for fiction.”

She only stared at him. “They are.”

“Tell me how you’re filling them in.”

Freddie looked off towards the window on the far side of the room. It was almost wistful, but struck Jack as disingenuous. It was an act to increase her own sense of drama, which only made him roll his eyes. When she turned back, the ginger asked, “Did Abigail Hobbs kill Nicholas Boyle?”

He blinked, “What makes you say that?”

She chose to point out that, “You are arresting her for something.”

Jack smiled his own kind of serenely. “Could be arresting you for something too. It’s completely possible to tear up your chance to tell this story before you take it.”

“I’ve already got exclusive rights to this story. I can write whatever I want about her.” She paused and sneered, “So long as it’s true, of course.”

“Of course,” he agreed pleasantly. It’s only too easy to claim something as the truth these days anyway. “So why don’t you tell me why you are actually asking me that?”

She fidgeted in her seat and eventually decided that lounging was far too much for her. Posture straightened, Freddie looked him in the eye, challenging him as best she could. “Abigail,” she began. “She is one of those very smart girls that hasn’t figured out that smart girls grow up. We see all the moves that they’re making when they’re trying to hide something.” Neither spoke for a moment. “I think I have my answer, but now I’m curious. If Will had to sneak Abigail out of here, what is he trying to hide?”

Shortly after this, Comte Lecter had bustled in the room and promptly dismissed Lounds, claiming that since her purpose for being there was not there, then neither should she be. Jack, for his part, had had **enough** of the lying and half-truthing that was coming out through this investigation. What he knew was that Abigail Hobbs had killed Nicholas Boyle, Will was protecting her, and Hannibal was protecting him. After all of this turning around and ridiculous behavior, Jack was done. Andraste’s pyre! If he had to listen to one more Maker-damned lie, he might burst. He was called a Seeker of Truth for a reason and right now that was what he was going to get. Since neither of the two more direct objects of his investigation were here, Jack was going to have to resort to the tangential one that was right in front of him.

The Seeker rounded on the nobleman. “What in the Void is going on between Will and the Hobbs girl?” he nearly shouted, at the end of his patience. It was about fucking time that someone didn’t obfuscate or lie in a conversation with him. He wanted a straight answer.

Hannibal demurred with: “Will has been victim to many unusual and irrational thoughts.”

“Unrelated,” Jack shot.

“Not so.”

Jack reluctantly took the bait; apparently, they were still being cryptic. “Has he acted on them?”

Hannibal looked thoughtful for a moment before answering, “Not that I’m aware of.” Alright then. “Or he’s aware of, for that matter.”

“And what, pray tell, is that supposed to mean?” Jack asked, barely keeping from snapping further. Nobles were often infuriating, even this one that he counted as a friend. At the moment, he wanted to shake him into giving him a straight answer.

“He has experienced periods of lost time.” That was… not what he was expecting.

Some of the anger died down inside him. Lost time was not a good sign for mages. It couldn't be possession! Could it? "I've seen him slightly confused when coming from the Fade when he was waking up. There was some disorientation."

"That's not the only place it has happened. I've seen him in other places, this one in fact. He had no idea where he was or how he got here."

"Other places," Jack repeated slowly, not liking where the conversation was going. It sounded like Hannibal was suggesting that Will might be an abomination. When would- How would that have happened? Will was definitely one of the most resolute people that he knew. He would always find a way back to himself! For him to be possessed… A tiny voice inside him said that maybe the resolute and strong person he saw in Will wasn't Will at all. He crushed it. Or, he tried to at least. "With no idea where he was or how he got there."

Hannibal nodded, "At first I believed it was an alternative personality state. He would appear perfectly normal and not remember a thing, but a fractured part of him would."

Jack narrowed his eyes, "You knew about this."

His Lordship rushed to correct his assumption, "He's only recently started to discuss these episodes with me."

His anger was back. "Well." He inhaled deeply through his nose and back out again a few times, trying to calm his temper. "Unless recently was right before I walked into this room, you failed to mention any of this to me."

Hannibal paced around slightly, looking irritated as well. "I was trying to determine if this was simply stress or something more. It wouldn't do to have Will thrown in a Circle simply because he had a lot more on his plate than usual." Jack had a feeling it was more complicated than that.

"And what do you believe now?" Hannibal hesitated. That was when Jack knew; Hannibal had already made up his mind about what had happened. He simply did not want to condemn his friend or cause a potentially hasty/damaging reaction. Jack decided to goad, slightly, "He took Abigail Hobbs, Comte Lecter. If there is a time to come to a conclusion it is now. I need to know where they could be going."

The noble turned away, a sad far away look in his eyes. "I don't know."

"We have reason to believe that she was involved in her father's crimes, we just don't know how involved. Why has Will taken her now?"

Hannibal did his own breathing exercises before answering, "I believe that I might have come to a conclusion. I am reminded of a scant few weeks ago when I spoke with Will about Marissa Schurr. The young man told me that upon seeing her body, he felt guilty. This was not because he couldn't save her, but because he felt that, in his heart, he had killed her."

"Where was he that night?"

Hannibal shook his head, “I don’t know.”

“He was at Sutcliffe’s office when he was killed and had access to Georgia Madchen’s room on a regular basis.”

“Is he a suspect?”

Jack glared from the corner of his eye, “Have you come to a conclusion, your Lordship?”

“I believe I have.” Hannibal paused. “From what evidence I have gathered from Will, I believe that a spirit of the Fade manifested itself as Garrett Hobbs, or was so affected by Garrett Hobbs that it came into existence, and has attached itself to him. I’m not sure how much power that it might have over Will, but if it does exist it seems to be getting stronger. All it would require from him is a little indulgence in the grotesque, which he does any time he looks at a scene for you.”

This wasn’t good news; this was infinitely worse than all that Jack had previously imagined. If Will was possessed by anything, especially a spirit attached to Garrett Hobbs, this would be a disaster. They needed to find Will and fast. If only because, well… “Will has Hobbs’ daughter.”

“Whom Hobbs was intending to kill.” Very astute, Comte Lecter. Maker’s balls! They needed to get to Will fast. Hannibal placed a hand on his shoulder in a usually unprecedented kind of touch. “I’m sorry Jack,” he said, attempting comfort.

There was no comfort. There was only his sense of duty, both to the young man he had begun to think of as family and to his Order which dictated that no possessed mage should be allowed to roam free, let alone alive. Jack spun on his heel and left, knowing he needed to gather the others and get moving before Abigail and Will got much further. The squad was going to be furious.

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As soon as Jack had left the suite, Hannibal began to pack his things. It was three weeks to Red Crossing at a regular pace and Abigail and Will already had most of the day on the rest of them. By the time the Seeker managed to organize enough and find supplies for the journey, it would be a whole day. If he was going to get to the pair first, he needed to leave now. Nesiraya glanced in on him and then immediately began helping with his belongings. Hannibal needed riding clothes, supplies for camping (much as he didn’t want to, it was faster than staying at inns), rations (also much to his consternation), and anything else to help with the journey.

Once everything was packed, Hannibal left with nary a farewell. He didn’t have time for pleasantries and needed to be able to disguise the time of his departure. He gave permission for Nesiraya to cover for him in whatever capacity she deemed fit, and he trusted her enough not to damage his reputation too overmuch. At best, she said he was sick, and at worst some very strange rumors were spread about his love life. It would probably be the latter as she did enjoy humbling him from time to time.

Luckily, he left the gates without too much fuss. The Seekers had put out requests for a curfew to monitor those going in and out of the city, but gold can buy a lot. Just a few coins and he was through without issue. His horse was raring to go when he arrived and only required a small nudge before it burst through to the city. If they were lucky, they would overtake them on the way. If they weren't, well Hannibal had a good idea of where in Red Crossing Will was taking Abigail and it wouldn't be difficult to spin the circumstance to his whims. Hannibal had already planted doubt in Jack; Will had become a liability to his continued safety and anonymity. He needed to get rid of the problem, even if he didn't want to.

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It took Jack a few minutes to gather his party, but it didn't take long after that for the gathered group to begin rushing out of Halamshiral and into the wilderness that surrounded it. They were going to stay on the Imperial Highway, as Jack believed that the pair wouldn't stray too far from what amounted to safety. With only two people travelling together, moving away from the road frequently traveled would put them in immediate danger of bandits and thieves, which they would still have to deal with on the road.

Neither Jimmy nor Brian said anything to Jack about where they were going and why, which left Beverly and Alana to question Jack's judgement. He was acting as if something was possessing him, driving him to the chase. He drove them at a steady pace in an attempt to gain on their prey, Will and Abigail Hobbs. When the senior of the squad finally revealed this bit of information, the second in command nearly mutinied, only stayed by her student and lifelong friends working together to stop her. Jack did manage to explain himself fairly well when pushed, but that only left the two women of the party even more worried. Both of them had known Will long enough to say that this kind of behavior was unexpected.

Alana didn't say too much, but Beverly took the opportunity to question the force that they were being brought in with. She could tell that Jack was hesitating. Something wasn't right and it stung to think that the suspicion was directed at her friend. It felt like Jack was trying to keep something from her to spare her feelings. She never did like when people did that.

It took three weeks to get to Red Crossing. That was where Jack was taking them, back to the scene of the crime. Back where Abigail first came into their lives and Will first really moved from observer to participator. Inside, the ex-Sister, former noble, now Seeker in training knew that going back to Red Crossing only meant one thing. Someone was going to die.

Red Crossing was known throughout Orlais for being the catalyst that started the Exalted Marches on the Dales and led to the fall of the new elvhen nation. A second Elvhenan. It was all because a young girl from the village and an elven boy kept meeting in secret to celebrate their love, forbidden and looked down upon by both cultures. The boy was even willing to leave his people behind and the girl was happy to shun hers if it meant they were together. Now, they were following the scent of blood in the wake of a young woman from Red Crossing and the elven man that saved her. The history that Alana learned said that the girl was found in the boy's arms by elven hunters and they attacked in their ire. The murder was seen by the guards and they killed every elf they saw.

The young man died, arrow through the neck with his love's corpse in his arms.

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Will and Abigail hurried for three weeks to Red Crossing. Despite everything going on back in Halamshiral, their hurried pace was not because of the chase occurring along the Imperial Highway. In fact, neither of them were aware of their pursuers. They simply wanted to get to the bottom of the mystery of the Copy Killer and take vengeance for their dead friend. Across the once dead lands of the Exalted Plains they went, watching the scenery of dead trees and grass that were slowly yielding to new growth. It had been several hundred years since that time, but the land was only just starting to grow back.

“This is so flat,” Abigail commented once, watching another carrion bird flit around the ruined carcass of a wagon. “There’s nothing here.”

“This is the scene of a massacre,” Will told her. “It’s called the Exalted Plains, because this is when the Exalted Marches on the elves by the Chantry occurred.”

A flowering tree peeked out among the dried husks, standing as a testament of time against history. Will had always thought that pain was pain, no matter how small or far away, but here was something celebrating spring at one of the worst places in the history of the people. “The Dales were once gifted to the elves for their loyalty at the side of the Andraste, especially Shartan, the elven rebel. It was supposed to be the end of thousands of years of slavery and was only ours for a few centuries before it was taken again.”

Abigail’s face scrunched together, almost like she didn’t understand why it was a big deal. Then, it abruptly relaxed as realization dawned. “Four centuries is nothing compared to thousands of years.” He nodded. “And they just decided that elves couldn’t have this land.”

“They decided that my people could have nothing.”

They leaned together as the Mabari scampered around the cart. Several wagons with humans were travelling the other direction on the Highway and looked at them curiously before minding their own business. Will had covered his ears and changed his clothes a while back after a couple of people asked Abigail if she was safe. To be fair, she had been clearly dressed as a young noblewoman and him as a Dalish elf, so they were a highly unlikely pair. The younger brunette had changed too. Her clothing made the pair too much of a target to bandits and they couldn’t afford to attempt to outrun them.

Abigail was very polite with her questions, which Will appreciated. He was sure to be just as polite back with his own inquiries. Both of them were trying to close whatever gap they had been dancing around. He could tell that she had been holding something back; it had been nagging at him since their conversation in his home, but he was trying to respect her privacy. The closer they got, the more obvious how much it occupied her mind. Will could sympathize with her preoccupation. Nothing ever came easy to anyone.

Every now and then they would pass by some bit of architecture. The remnants of bridges and towers from ages long past. Aqueducts broken apart and reflecting both elven and Tevinter design would appear out of nowhere, trees and flowers growing from them and obscuring just as quickly. On one such occasion, Will saw a statue of a great wolf lying

between the arches. It started him in a rather dramatic way and he immediately put his back to it for a quick prayer to Mythal for protection.

Considering the very obvious elven inspired stonework around it, there was no doubt in Will's mind. This was a statue dedicated to Fen'harel, the Dread Wolf. His young companion was too curious for her own good and attempted to touch it once she realized that Will was behaving strangely towards it.

"Don't!" Will yelled, much louder than he meant to. She froze and he approached to remove her from its presence. "Don't touch it! We need to turn away and walk in that direction for a bit."

"Is that…?' she asked and Will recalled that they had several conversations about the nature of the Great Wolf and what he meant to the elves. Will confirmed her suspicions quiet ly and led them a little further away.

"It is Fen'harel. My apologies. Often my people would place statues of him away from the camp to encourage our safety. It was meant to represent how we did not affiliate ourselves with him, but still showed enough respect to appease him.

"Why would you still show respect if you didn't worship him?"

Humans never quite understood that part. They were usually so focused on the idea of a big good and a big evil: the Maker and the Void, Andrate and Maferath. "Fen'harel isn't evil. Sure, he is the Lord of Tricksters and the Betrayer, but he worked against the Forgotten Ones as well. The Dread Wolf is often known for answering prayers the exact way they were requested, it was just usually at the detriment of the asker. He was asked to stop a war, so he locked away both sides." Will stopped before deciding to continue with his words, knowing that it probably wasn't going to help convince her. "We also do that because he is the only god still walking in the world and keeping him appeased will prevent him from hurting anyone."

Abigail gave him such massive side eye that Jack would probably be proud. They wasted a bit of daylight walking away from the statue rather than towards it, but Will felt safer doing this small ritual and moving around it. They still found themselves among the aqueducts more than once, broken people among broken history, but they never did come across another statue like that.

They did stop in Verchiel when passed through. Will acquiesced to letting them stay one night in an inn. Abigail was rather insistent, claiming that he looked far too pasty and that perhaps they should have waited a week or so before heading out, just to let him get better. He refused; they were on too much of a time crunch to afford any stops. Not knowing when the murderer might kill again made every second not moving a second wasted.

Red Crossing itself wasn't as bustling as last time. Many of the people had moved further away from the village with the planting season underway and many more simply did not feel comfortable living in the location of all of the murders. Those that they did run across did not recognize either of them. On Will's part it was mostly because he hid his ears and tried to cover up some of his face to make him seem less elf-like. Abigail only had to act like a

proper noblewoman and most people didn't recognize her. Once again, Abigail asked if he needed to rest, but Will refused. Pressing forward was all that mattered. They needed to reach the conclusion of their story.

It was strange to be back in this place, after all that had gone on. There was an unnatural stillness to it, something neither of the guests to the Hobbs' cabin could quite define. In this moment, they were entrapped by it, allowing the suspension to penetrate their beings and attach itself to their bones. They stepped gingerly around work benches and the antlers carefully mounted on the walls. Touching anything would disrupt the moment here.

"The second killer clearly knew about this place. Or, at least, the Copy knew your father well enough to guess at its existence," Will told Abigail while they traversed through the room. The younger woman glanced slightly over to the pair in the center of the room, antlers still stained with Marissa's blood.

"Did you feel like you knew him? You guessed about this place's existence," she said. The tone of her voice told Will all he needed to know: she was trying to understand how well someone else could know her father when she couldn't. It wasn't her fault of course. Will got the feeling that Garrett Hobbs didn't want his daughter to know him, not as a monster anyway.

He felt the need to be honest with her. "I tried to know him, but that wasn't what gave this place away." His eyes swept the room and all its pristine horror. The grotesque implication of the place displayed in the gleaming bone trophies encasing the room. Madness was bred and cultivated here, and despite it all Will still felt lost in the violence inflicted. "I think I'm still trying."

His companion tried to take him apart and puzzle him back together with a look. "Even after you killed him?" she asked, almost like it surprised her.

He shrugged. "It might've been even because I killed him. I wanted to understand him. I had to understand him." He trailed away as he saw Abigail drifting towards a pair of hart antlers. She ran her finger across the point and started to bear down. If she continued she was going to draw blood. "Do you hunt?" she asked.

"Honestly, I was never good at it," Will confessed. "All elves are taught to hunt from an early age, but I could barely catch my own food. I still keep the supplies, especially fletching components. Fletching arrows soothes me; it's something to do with my hands."

"A craftsman," she teased.

He shrugged and waved at her hand, which she removed from danger. "I suppose that's one way of looking at it. I always thought it would be more useful if I could hunt. For a while, I fished, but that's a little harder to do when you don't spend a lot of time around rivers."

“Fishing isn’t that different.”

“What do you mean?”

Abigail stepped out of sight, moving past the support in the middle of the room. “In both situations, you engage in an intimate pursuit of the prey. The only difference is that one you stalk, the other you lure.”

The words struck him, her casual way of saying something like that in this place, where both of them were so haunted. For so long, Will had thought of her father as a hunter. Abigail even said that he had taught her how to hunt in addition to the time they spent foraging for supplies and potion ingredients. Was Hobbs really a hunter? What did that make his daughter? “What about you, Abigail? Your father taught you to hunt, but what were you?”

She seemed amused. “Now it’s your turn to tell me what you mean.”

He stepped forward and the wooden planks settled around him. The creaking floor felt oddly soft under his feet, almost like it would give way if he put too much weight on it. He needed to tread carefully, but the oppression of the room and the presence of Abigail’s father in it pushed his foot through. “You, Abigail.” His companion stepped from behind the support, but kept moving sideways to maintain distance. Her expression wasn’t distressed, but the anticipation of it. Under normal circumstances, her wariness would have upset him. Now, it was a proclamation of guilt. “Did you fish or did you hunt?”

She gasped out, “I was the lure.” Another movement to the side, almost fluid. Her teachers had done well with her. If he pushed, she would simply twirl out of the way. Already, she was readying herself for combat. Abigail needn’t have bothered. The air was punched out of him when she asked: “Did Hannibal tell you?”

No. No he hadn’t. His eyes began to water as the magnitude of this secret washed over him. Abigail backed herself into a corner and he just. Kept. Moving. Will shook his head; any words that he had were gone. The young woman that he would have died for was shakily saying, “He said that you’d protect me. He said that you’d keep it a secret!” It sounded like begging and that killed him a little inside. When he was finally in front of her, Will noticed that he was about the same height. He placed his hands on her shoulders, too terrified to look her in the eyes. Knowing that Abigail hadn’t been innocent, not even for a moment, was too painful to bear. It didn’t matter that Nicholas Boyle had happened; this kind of involvement murdered his opinion of her. All it took was a swift motion and she was pinned to the wall, struck through by the antlers. She looked just as shocked as Will had imagined Nicholas was when Abigail stabbed him and her body was relaxing into the same pose that Marissa had been found in.

The tableau was terrifying and knowing that he made it even more so. A few stumbles back and he was nearly impaling himself on the walls.

“Something is wrong with you!” Will heard Abigail yell and frantically jerked his head to the side. There she was, still whole and alive, but making her way down the stairs. “I know you said you were better, but I think you’re still sick!” No he wasn’t! He was finally thinking clearly.

In tears, he sobbed out, “Jack Crawford was right. He knew all along.” Abigail looked just as wrecked as he felt. It only added anger to the tumultuous mix; what right did she have to feel betrayed? “You killed Nicholas Boyle and you helped your father kill all those girls.”

“I didn’t help my dad kill anyone!” she shouted back. It was a good thing that this cabin was so far out of the way or they would have been heard far and wide.

“You lured them, didn’t you. You killed them; who else have you killed?”

Her face scrunched into something like rage, but it had a bitter taste that didn’t quite fit. “You think I am the copy? I killed Marissa? I killed Georgia? How dare you!”

Will spat out, “If you didn’t, someone you know did.”

“What about you? You had just as many opportunities, if not more.” Abigail was almost at the stairs. Only a second more and she would leave him up there. “You were there, you saw Marissa and you had easy access to Georgia. You knew about this place.” She was outright screaming past the tears in her eyes. “There is something wrong with you!”

The world blurred together and apart. Cogent thought burst like Georgia’s corpse must have. His head was screaming as a migraine set in. The pain was nearly blinding and eventually Will bent over as its sheer force brought him to his knees.

Upon awakening, he immediately wanted to close his eyes. Will woke alone and abandoned in the upper floor of the Hobbs’ cabin, surrounded by the evidence of his ultimate failure and the broken trust between him and the girl he had been trying to protect.

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Hurt, Abigail had left Will at the cabin. Admittedly, leaving him while he was experiencing some sort of break was not the kindest thing, but she couldn't stand to be in the same room as the man who could not accept her as she was. She had done so much to try and appear wonderful in his eyes and his rejection and assertion of her guilt burned her to the core. A separate and clearly more rational part of her being pointed out that Will was clearly compromised and had only just been told something of great and terrible magnitude. No one would have taken it well. Her larger being acknowledged that she would listen to this voice later, but, for now, would wallow in the pain.

The young woman picked her way to the abandoned building that was her childhood home, soaked through to the bone from the rainstorm. Years of memories made up the floor and filled in the cracks in the walls, and she could almost feel them from outside of the house. The zenith was upon her and she stood on its precipice, waiting to jump or fall. One foot in front of the other brought her to the door and it was open before she could truly process it. The opening yawned and she stepped into the gaping maw of the house.

Floating mites perpetuated the feeling of stillness that came over her as soon as she entered the building. Time was suspended here, stuck at the moment of death and dying. Abigail snuck around the empty floors, everything of worth having been looted by this point. There was still some furniture, but it was half-rotting. Around her, the house settled, groaning as it

sunk a little further into the earth. Occasionally, she slipped up and made noise on the creaking wooden boards, the otherwise quiet sounds exploding into the empty air.

Finally, she slipped down the hall and into the room where the sin was committed. It was in the kitchen that her father had tried to murder her. Far too quickly, the brunette rounded and corner and almost ran into a man standing in the archway. It only took a second for her to recognize Comte Hannibal Lecter and she rushed to embrace him. “What are you doing here?” she asked and pulled away slightly. Neither Will nor her had told anyone where they were going, and although she was relieved to see him here, his presence was also odd.

Hannibal continued to cling to her slightly, refusing to release his hold. “I was worried about you. After Will declared his intent to take you to Red Crossing, I strongly advised against it. I’m sorry it took so long for me to follow after you both.” Finally, he let her go and scanned the room. He turned to look in her eyes and asked, “Where is Will, Abigail?”

Inhaling sharply, she told him of her current conflict. “I left him at the cabin. I didn’t feel safe with him, so I left him.” She shook her head, thinking back about WIll’s terrible reaction to the situation and his rejection. “He knows everything,” she gasped and pushed whatever she could down.

Lightning struck when Hannibal replied, “So does Seeker Jack Crawford.”

She fought the desire to hug him again. “You can’t protect me anymore.” Hannibal shook his head. “Maybe I could run? It’s a big world and I could try and cross the mountains. If I go far enough in any direction but south, I could find a place where they don’t know about me.”

“And?” Hannibal challenged. “What would you do? I can’t help you directly or I would lose any resources to do so and otherwise you would be a lone girl with a little combat skill trying to make her way alone. You don’t know a trade and that will draw people’s attention. That means you can’t go to northern Orlais. Your accent would make you stick out painfully in Ferelden where they despise Orlesians and will be suspicious of you, especially only a couple of years after disaster. There is a lot of risk trying to go to Nevarra or the Free Marches on land and worse by ship. To the south, you have the Arbor Wilds and the Gamordan Peaks. You cannot run, you have nowhere to go.” She sobbed and started to move, but he held her at arm’s length away, refusing to let her leave his grip. “They’ll arrest you when they find you. They’ll arrest Will, too.”

“Did he-” Abigail tried to contain herself. She had been training to suppress emotions on her face for once; it shouldn’t be that hard. “Did he kill Marissa?”

The smile that she received in return could only be described as serene. “They will believe that he did. Others, too.”

It dawned on her just what kind of person that she was dealing with and the young woman took a step back, tensing against the hands gripping her shoulders. Comte Lecter had her in his grasp and, no matter how much she wanted him to give her space, he wasn’t letting go. She swallowed nervously. “Will always said that the messenger that spoke with my dad was the serial killer… Why were you there? Why did you speak with him?” the brunette asked, pleading for the answer to be innocent or misunderstood.

Hannibal tilted his head, beady eyes glittering inscrutability. If she had to guess, and at this moment she had to, he was amused or considering something carefully. Perhaps both. “I wanted to warn your father.”

She breathed, taking in as much air as she could while she still could. It was noisy and gave away too much, but in the face of certain death, Abigail found that she was caring less and less. “Why?” was gasped out in between breaths. She continued hurtling towards the moving cart, despite all sense.

“I was curious what would happen.” She inhaled sharply and worked to prevent herself from hyperventilating. Her heart was pounding and it was only broadcasting her weakness. It had to be, with how loud it was. Despite everything, Hannibal continued. “I was curious what would happen when I killed Marissa.” Here he smiled, the corners of his mouth moving beyond perceptibly. “I was curious what you would do.”

“You wanted me to kill Nicholas,” Abigail realized.

“I was hoping,” he said, so gently that it could have been, should have been, about anything except for the murder of an innocent young man.

“Oh Maker,” she whispered and one of his hands lifted up from her shoulders to gently brush her face. Something inside of her screamed to do something. One half of her was free so she should fight! She wouldn’t do anything. At this point, she couldn’t; her fate was sealed the moment she embraced him and left Will in the secret cabin to his own. “Nicholas Boyle is more important for you gutting him,” Hannibal asserted, trying to convince her. “He changed you irrevocably, which is far more important than the life he clamored after. He allowed you to become in touch with what made you and your father so alike.”

Abigail sent a quick prayer, despite having never been actively religious and apologized to her mother in her head. “How many people have you killed?”

He brushed a lock of hair back behind her ear, “Many more than your father.”

Finally, the tears fell, silent as her breathing calmed and her heart slowed. This was it. “Are you going to kill me?”

The second hand raised and they cupped her face. Abigail lifted her hands to grasp his forearms, but didn’t tighten her hold or try anything that might be considered violent, just in case he responded so early or made the death worse. He was her lifeline before he severed her attachment to him. Hannibal’s thumbs brushed her tears from her cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Abigail. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you in this life.”

Chapter End Notes

Elvhen translation:

Da'len: Little one, little child

Ir abelas: I am sorry/I am filled with sorrow

Var Falon na'din: Our friend is dead.

Ma harel lasa

Chapter Summary

> "I like the stories where the villain was the man beside you the whole time. The best villains don’t see themselves as evil. They’re fighting for a good cause and willing to get their hands dirty." - Varric Tethras, Dragon Age: Inquisition

Chapter Notes

> 08/31/24: Not yet edited
>
> It is done! Sorry about the delay. I'll admit that finishing this was super difficult. For two of the weeks I was having trouble finding motivation to write and basically took it a line at a time, then all of the motivation came at me in a rush. I hope you guys have enjoyed it so far!
>
> By the time this is posted, I will already be working on the next part. I don't know when I'll decide to actively post it (I might try and put some extra chapters under my belt to give some breathing room). I also know that the codex is behind, so I'm going to catch that up soon.
>
> Please leave a comment! I'd love some feedback on how this is going.
>
> Ma harel lasa: You tricked me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal watched, entranced as Abigail Hobbs crumbled before him. He had known her and in all of that time she had never invoked the Maker or uttered a prayer, but here she was begging an absent, uncaring god for some kind of mercy. Mercy would come, but it wouldn’t be the Maker’s. Even with that in his heart though, another equally visceral part of him felt… shame? It wasn’t guilt. This was what he needed to do, but there was a sense that the Comte should have been able to prevent this from happening. “How many people have you killed?” she gasped.

He smiled as gently as he could muster, several plans already forming in his head. An idle hand brushed past her hair and uncovered an ear, something that could potentially be a great use in getting both of them out. Awareness dawned on her when he replied, “Many more than your father.” He watched as fragments of shattered trust fell just as surely as the tears on her face.

Her breathing calmed and hope fled from her heart, leaving only the kind of peace that came with knowing you were going to die. “Are you going to kill me?” Abigail asked, but Hannibal had a feeling she had already settled on an answer. It was good for her then, that he had a different one in mind.

He cupped her face in his hands, looking past her face to the one of another little girl so long ago now. The illusion was broken as the actual girl in front of him clutched his arms. Her eyes implored his, making pleas and accusations in equal measure. The decision had already been made the moment she stepped back into this home, and Hannibal genuinely didn’t know if this fate was a kinder one. “I’m so sorry, Abigail. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you in this life.”

Stepping away, Hannibal watched as she jerked forward and back, waffling between fear and comfort. “But.” She froze. “I can protect you in the next.” Hannibal stepped away and showed her what he had in store.

So much blood, more than he probably needed but plenty to convince the Seekers of Truth that a young woman was long gone. He had collected it fairly recently in order to prevent it from prematurely congealing. That would make it awfully difficult to spread in a convincing pattern across the room. Without a word, Hannibal began setting up everything they would need to fake the death of Abigail Hobbs and allow her to leave this room free. The person in question stared at him for an extended period of time before joining him.

“Blood fuels so much of our society today,” Hannibal began, now that he had her total and comprehending attention. “It is a bond, a ceremony, a ritual, and magic. The most powerful and misunderstood kind of magic. Blood is bound to the physical and creates the impossible.”

“I thought you weren’t a mage,” Abigail stated slowly, testing the waters between them with the new understanding that was growing there.

“I am not,” he replied. “I am simply a person with a vested interest in this world, mundane and not. What we are performing is something of a blood ritual. We are destroying the mundane to move beyond; this is the most grounded form of creation.”

“Out with the old, in with the new.”

Hannibal allowed a genuine smile to slip through the cracks. “Change or die. Even knowing who we are today, we can not predict who we will be tomorrow. You are defined by the now and claiming the beyond. A year ago, would you have imagined this moment?”

“No.”

“You are beyond her, the girl that aided her father and was content to otherwise live simply. Now, Abigail, you are more for her passing.”

Blue eyes stared at him. “How would you have done it… if you were going to do it?”

He gestured around them. “Here. I would have done it in this room, right where he was going to kill you. I would have cut your throat like your father did so long ago. A real death in the

place of the old symbolic one. Now, we are performing another."

She shuddered and worked quickly to compose herself. Nesiraya had been teaching her well, but she still had much to learn. Luckily for heer, he would be able to give her undivided attention as she required. Hannibal would be nothing less but a giving caretaker. Naturally, Abigail had to cause him to backtrack. "You are not my father." It wasn't said as an accusation, but a dropped statement. A fact that was not meant to bruise.

"I am not, but would it be so terrible to allow me my investment?"

"Your investment?" A careful grimace, not an insult to him, etched itself on her face. "I don't know if that's smart.

"Clever," he threw out. "We never get wiser as we get older, dear Abigail, but we do learn to avoid or raise a certain amount of hell, depending on which we prefer." Hannibal finished preparing the room with her help and turned to her. "Now, for this to finish, I need to collect some flesh." She raised a dubious eyebrow at the dagger that he unsheathed. A light chuckle, and he clarified, "Not a pound, only a piece. Something you can live without."

By the look on her face, he knew what she was thinking. Given the strict definition of living, there was a lot a person could do without. "A finger?" she asked and he shook his head.

Taking her hands in his, Hannibal ran the pads of his fingers against her delicate knuckles. "No, I couldn't bear to take something as precious as that. I was hoping to teach you more about music and the visual arts. It would be wonderful to watch you engage with your inner creativity and you'll need these for it." The noble ran a careful hand through her hair, invoking as much paternal interest as he could muster.

The room was mostly finished, blood spread across it in great gushes. Time for the next step. "Are you ready to die Abigail?"

She closed her eyes, probably grieving for all that was and might have been. "Abigail Hobbs is dead," she whispered, letting go of who she is and was.

Hannibal smiled, pleased by this small victory. "Long live Abigail Hobbs."

Together, they finished the ritual and destroyed the mundane, using it to fuel the incredible.

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Will was running through the woods in the beautiful light of a half moon. Summer, the time of growth and freedom, was present all around in the comfortable night. The forest was beautifully green, mud squishing between his toes from a recent storm and the animals howling in the distance. He was tracking something running through the underbrush, trying to ghost through so he didn't startle whatever it was. A sudden noise had him twisting around, leveling his bow and releasing an arrow before he even registered it.

It was lucky that he wasn't a good shot.

Out from several trees came forth the hart, clad in raven feathers. The noises of the forest crashed into him as it shook out its curling antlers, colliding slightly with the branches overhead, but it did not flinch. It was beautiful: fearsome and majestic. Will stood frozen in awe and horror. There was still a decent distance between them, but he was still close enough that any charge from the creature could be fatal.

A blink and then it was gone. Will had lost sight of the hart, but he could still hear it rushing through the trees. Now Will knew what he was there to pursue and launched himself after it. Whatever element of surprise he might have had was gone, so the elf abandoned attempts at grace and quiet. Leaves and sticks cracked and crunched under his bare feet; low limbs too small to be decently called branches whipped against his leathers and smacked the uncovered portions of skin. A few of the stings were against his face. After several minutes of continuing as such, he suddenly became aware that the only sound among the trees was him. He stopped, but the patch where he dug in to pull back his momentum was slick and Will stumbled into the rough earth. He sat up and moved to examine the strange substance: thick, greasy blood.

He jerked away and around, trying to find the source of the liquid now clinging to his leg and sliding through the dirt. There was, in fact, a trail sprinkling the forest floor. Will was too curious to simply leave it alone, but caution was the better part of valor, so he kept his approach stealthy. As silently as possible, the explorer moved through the thicket and undergrowth, when finally the heaving sides of the hart were visible. Perhaps he was better shot than he thought? A few tentative steps closer revealed something else. Lying in the dirt beside the hart was Abigail Hobbs, an arrow lodged in her throat, cradled by the giant roots of an elder tree. She was choking on her own blood, frightened ice blue eyes pleading for him to fix this, but Will had seen enough wounds to know that he was too late.

A hand rested on his shoulder and Will froze. Slowly it caressed his back and shoulders, arm wrapping around him and dragging the hand with it and the figure moved in front and pulled the hand over his left shoulder to his chest. The elf looked up and saw the obsidian man, halla antlers twisted in jagged turns to the sky, all harsh angles. It hand pushed him back and Will
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Will woke. He was lying completely immobile on his bed, glazed eyes staring up at the ceiling of his shack that he hadn't lived in in nearly four months (give or take a week or so). Dawn light streaked through the windows and the holes in the walls, making it clear that nobody had moved in after his absence. Sound came back slowly, the individual barks of each hound becoming audible one by one. His eyes were still crusted with sleep as he looked around himself, the light streaming in hurting his eyes. Almost absentmindedly, Will noticed that it was a beautiful morning, just the right amount of warm and cool that lacked humidity.

He threw back his tattered blanket. It was funny; he didn't remember coming here nor going through the motions of getting ready for bed and going to sleep. The last thing that he could think of was leaving the Hobbs' cabin, and then everything went dark. Something butted against him: Winston. The hound was nudging his legs and looking at him with wide eyes. He placed his head on Will's leg, the weight of his companion grounding the young man. It was then that he noticed what exactly his legs looked like. They were covered in mud and a

little blood. Scratches were everywhere and extended up to his arms and a couple on his face. He had dreamed that he was running through the forest; had that actually happened?

His throat was hoarse and dry so Will moved over to get to his pack. He gulped the water, going far too fast to actually relieve the parched feeling, but the wish for relief overwhelmed good sense. Shortly after he took a break, shortness of breath hit him like a charging bronto. His chest was screaming for air and Will heaved; the Mabari were scrambling around him. Once, twice, thrice, Will gagged, desperately trying to dislodge whatever was blocking his air. His body juddered and retched and what came out had Will falling away. A single ear, possibly dwarven but more likely human, laid innocently on the floor. He kept retching, vomiting up whatever it was that he last ate until all that was left was bile.

The next few minutes were spent desperately searching the house and surrounding area. Maybe… Maybe nothing happened. He didn't feel like nothing happened. He felt like shit. Will sat on the ground near the front of the little shack. Sooner or later, someone would come.

It was another hour before anyone arrived, and, naturally, it was Hannibal. Seeing his sponsor and the man that argued with him so that he wouldn't take Abigail back here left a sour taste in his mouth. Nevertheless, at least the person wasn't Alana or Jack. Will wasn't looking forward to seeing their faces when they arrived. Perhaps he would be okay with Beverly seeing him, but… no. He wouldn't like that at all in his state.

Hannibal kneeled next to him. "Where's Abigail, Will? The Seekers will likely be here soon."

Inhale. Exhale. Will shook violently and tried to say, "I-I don't know. We went to Hobbs' cabin, and she didn't come back with me."

His Lordship stood, something unreadable in his eyes. Hannibal towered over him. "Show me." The noble held out his hand. Will reached back and took it. He pulled Will to him and allowed him to stand. Honestly, it was more like Will was clutching him for balance. It felt like his legs would give out at any moment. The younger man brought Hannibal with him back into the shack and to the ear. Immediately, he was rushed away by his sponsor and made to sit out front. It all seemed to drag on from there, his senses barely registered that the ratty blanket had been put on his shoulders. A few minutes went by before Hannibal must've come back; he was pulled from his thoughts by a hand on his shoulder.

"I don't remember going to bed last night," Will told him, dazed. "I must have." He looked down at himself, the scratches and the mud. "I dreamt I was running. My feet are all muddy. Maybe I took out the dogs and I-"

"Will." He fell silent. "You said that the last time that you saw her was at the Hobbs Cabin."

"She was afraid of me. I had an episode and she ran away."

A sigh. "Why was she afraid?"

Tentative hands came up and scrubbed at his eyes, trying to get rid of the crusted over feeling. It was the only thing that felt real, his fingers so rough that they nearly scratched the

delicate skin that surrounded the most prominent feature on his face. Two foreign hands grabbed at his.

This time, Hannibal enunciated slowly. His tone brooked no room for argument. “Why was she afraid?”

“I thought that I killed her. I thought I saw it, but then she was alive! It wasn’t real.” He shuddered and wished so badly that he had convinced Hannibal, but maybe he needed to convince himself first. “I know it wasn’t real.” The words felt hollow. When he finally looked at his friend’s face again, Hannibal’s eyes were sad, almost broken.

“The Seekers will be here soon, Will. We’ll need to tell them what happened.”

Wide eyes watched as the world around erupted into people. Will was hunched on the ground at the entrance to his old home, acutely aware of the green grass beneath his squirming toes and the warm breeze. In the last couple of weeks, it had become summer and he hadn’t even realized it. It had been that way in his nightmare, so maybe some part of him noticed it, but his conscious mind hadn’t. So focused on his mission and his proximity to Abigail, Will had neglected to pay attention to the passage of time. Once, Abigail had mentioned how she had been waiting for Summerday. It marked the entrance of the season and was a time to celebrate joy and the transition from childhood to adulthood. Abigail would never get to see hers.

A few people were herding his dogs away. Out of the corner of his eye, Will recognized Beverly and Alana, both of whom knew his dogs fairly well. At least they would know how to take care of them. Hannibal was at his side, standing just behind him and observing the swarm of Seekers and law enforcement that were tearing apart his belongings on the cart. He couldn’t bring himself to move, even when old heirlooms from his Clan and his childhood were tossed around by amateurs.

Just when Will was sure that no one would actually come to speak with him, Jack proved him wrong. The larger dark man stepped until the elf would have to crane his neck to see him, and that’s when he asked, “What are we going to find, Will? When we go back to the Hobbs house and cabin, will there be anything left?”

He swallowed and tried to process exactly what that statement implied. Will was acutely aware of the ear in the floor of the room behind him, so much so that its presence was burning his back. He was hoping this was a dream, but so far he hadn’t shown signs of waking up. Searching himself for an answer, Will found nothing. “I don’t know,” the young man whispered and sunk into himself.

Jack hung his head and motioned for Brian and Jimmy to come up. No one had taken his magic up to this point, but now Will felt it all leave him in a rush. Tingling overtook his limbs, a phantom brushing against his very being. Losing an extension of his being into the world should have felt more dramatic, but the elf couldn’t bring himself to care. Brian and Jimmy gently moved his arms behind him and shackled his wrists. They didn’t need to do more and both of them didn’t try to; cuffing his legs would only make him a hindrance at this point.

Will looked back towards the house as he walked away. Hannibal watched sadly from the doorway while someone ushered his dogs into a new cart. For a moment, Winston broke away and came barrelling towards him. Jimmy and Brian dived out of the way, not interested in blocking the path of a war hound. When the Mabari stopped in front of him, Will ached. He couldn't offer any kind of solace or comfort to him; he barely had any himself. Beverly rushed over and tried to pull Winston away without too much of a fuss.

She was lucky that she had a rapport with his hound so he didn't fight her. Will also tried to gesture for him to go with his friend, but that was difficult to do with no access to his arms. His head had to make do.

The men of the squad guided him into the back of a solid wagon that had only a grate between it and the outside world. It was a sight better than the ones he had seen with the cover being replaced only by iron bars. At least this way he would be afforded some privacy. Gingerly, Will stepped inside and tried to find a seat on the bench that didn't hurt his arms. The heavy door slammed shut, leaving him in near total darkness. The barest hint of light shuddered with the tree limbs blocking it in intervals as he was jerked in his seated position. As much as he was able, Will leaned into the corner to find a comfortable spot and prayed to the Creators that this would all be over soon.

Later, when they got where they were going, Will was sat on a small chair in the corner of the room, both hands chained to the bottom. It reminded him so much of the incident with Gideon that he begged not to have his feet restrained as well; since it was the squad that was processing him, they agreed. They had taken his magic after all, it's not like he could do anything to them. He was slightly uncomfortable, as he was left in his loose sleep clothes that barely covered anything. It was highly embarrassing, but he felt too numb for proper shame. Perhaps he would feel again later, although it was possible for him to be dead before this strange physical reaction finished. It was so strange to be back in these barracks. The Guard-Captain of Red Crossing had sneered at him when they brought him in. The mage hadn't been expecting a warm welcome, but that was just unnecessary.

Currently, the team was going through his possessions. Brian was slowly unpacking his belongings while Jimmy looked them over. His life was spread coldly across the table, all of his possessions unpacked for any passerby to see. Clothes, small charms, potion ingredients, relics of his time with his Clan, healing supplies, a mess kit, and much more were categorized and placed aside for later. He wondered if they would be thrown out; that seemed like a waste of resources. If they didn't, who would get them? Will wondered if he could request control over who got what. His Dalish relics would go to Beverly obviously. His healer's kit and potion ingredients would go to Brian; some of the ingredients were pretty rare and would delight the alchemist. Jimmy might appreciate a few of the trinkets he collected; the man always liked small tokens and baubles.

He wondered about a lot of things. What was the purpose of wondering?

He looked straight ahead, even as the other three kept glancing at him awkwardly; he could feel their stares and discomfort. Alana had been asked to accompany Jack while he spoke with the interim High Seeker. Apparently the temporary replacement for Chilton headed to Red Crossing upon reading a message from Jack about Will's situation. The purpose of

Alana's presence was so that they could announce her apprenticeship officially and so that Alana could see how reporting to superiors worked.

Beverly was examining and treating the more obvious wounds on his legs. There was nothing serious; he could have told her that. Her dedication to the task was admirable considering that he couldn imagine how betrayed she must feel. He certainly felt betrayed and he was the one who apparently killed someone. His body felt like a stranger whose skin he was wearing. It was only after a few minutes that she spoke up. The half-elf, his former best friend, sat back on her heels, staring at his chained arms and bared legs for a moment before finally, **finally**, looking at him. "I can't do this, the silent treatment. I can't pretend that I don't know you and I can't pretend that I don't see these scratches or blood that might not be yours."

Both Jimmy and Brian glanced over at her announcement before returning back to work, Jimmy a bit more reluctantly. Will didn't say anything in response. He didn't think that he could.

"We once met at Beth Le'Beau's place because you didn't trust yourself to know what was real. This is real, Will."

"I know," he whispered. He wished that he didn't.

"How did you come to have these?" she demanded of him, but he shook his head to show that he didn't know. "Do you know how they got there?"

"No. Not with any certainty, anyway."

Beverly's face pursed as well as the rest of her demeanor. "Part of the job is being certain. That comes with the evidence and with our faith. I didn't want to find anything, but what we do have is starting to build a picture I don't like. I thought we were friends, that I could be certain about who you are, but you aren't even about yourself."

"Not anymore," he breathed out, feeling tingles and pinpricks on the edges of his vision. Tears were threatening, but he held them back. It wouldn't do to cry now, not where it would be considered a sign of weakness or manipulation.

"You are a mage. What's more is that you are a Dreamer. You can't afford to be uncertain about yourself or you will be easy prey. Your conviction about your identity was why Jack didn't have you dragged off to any Circles, but if you weren't, you needed to be somewhere where protection would be given for yourself and others."

"Protection from myself for myself." A single, bitter laugh escaped him. A Circle would chew him up and spit him back out. "I thought this was only temporary, that I would get used to it. I had never been in and out of the Fade beyond a regular sleep schedule this often. I thought that once I got used to it, I would get better."

"And how long have you been lying about what's going on with you?" Beverly asked, furious.

His insides burned. Will had never lied, not to Beverly. At least, he hadn't directly. Sure, he left some less pertinent things out, but overall his friend had always received the truth from him. "I wasn't lying-"

She cut him off, "You told me that you knew yourself. After you realized what was going on, you should have excused yourself. Maybe- No, definitely you would have received treatment early and maybe someone could have helped. Now, because of your irresponsibility, a girl is dead." Abruptly, she stood and took a couple of steps away from him. He hated this, hated that his best friendship was being ruined by circumstances only slightly beyond his control. He did this; he needed to face the consequences.

"I can't see you right now," Beverly declared and turned on her heel. All Will could do is look at the ground as her footsteps echoed across the stone floor. The sound of the slamming door rang in his ears long after she had left.

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Jack glanced over at Alana, both of them leaving the rest of the squad with Will. They had already taken inventory of his belongings and examined him for evidence. He knew that they were all hoping they would find nothing except for the ear, but that wasn't the case. The senior hadn't been able to watch the whole procedure, supremely disappointed in himself for a variety of reasons. The fact that he managed to not see this happening was lodged in his gut and being. Failing Will was probably the one of the worst things that he had ever done, after cajoling Miriam Lass into going after the Highwayman and leaving her to die. The apprentice couldn't be in the room with them either, her own feelings coming to the forefront despite herself.

He reached out to her and Alana folded in on herself, only taking the tiniest of comforts from him. Behind them, the Mabari Hounds whined for their master. The higher-ups told Jack that they needed to be caged for the time being, but no one in the group was going to let them stay that way for long. Already, the Senior Seeker was making plans to have them transferred to the Val Royeaux kennels until the time where they would find good homes. Beverly had already made a couple of bids to the High Seeker for the lot of them. Maybe, if Will ended up released and brought to the White Spire, then they could be brought there and he could interact with them again. Maybe.

"I still can't believe that we found anything else," Alana said, referring to the skin and blood found buried under Will's nails and the defensive wounds found on his arms and legs.

"There's nothing much we can do about it," Jack said. "We found evidence that someone felt threatened by him enough to fight back. Even then, the Spire and the Lord Seeker would have demanded-"

The brunette held up a hand to his face. "Stop. Just stop." He turned away once he saw that her eyes were tearing up. Better to let her have this moment of grief sooner rather than later when it would be a detriment. "Please don't speak right now," she pleaded.

He remained silent.

“Do you remember what you said to me, back when you first asked for me to guide Will?” He did. “You promised me that he wouldn’t lose himself... That he wouldn’t get too close.” A hand touched his shoulders and he looked into her wet blue eyes, feeling the accusation dwelling within them. “You could see that he was breaking,” Alana whispered.

Jack had and he knew. For so long he had argued that Will needed independence, that he needed stability. He had tried a hands-off approach, thinking (knowing) that being more involved would push Will away, against his better judgement. When he argued with others that Will would come back to himself, had it truly been for their sake or his own? It seems that he should have pushed more, involved himself more. Maybe then this wouldn’t have happened.

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. If a wish was a fish, we’d all have plenty to eat.

“I did,” he admitted. “I’ve been trying to justify it to myself this whole time, but I did see that he was breaking. He was saving lives and I needed him to.”

Her face scrunched up, a vague impression of rage. “Not Abigail’s.” Alana had spent more time with the young woman than most, perhaps only weeded out by the moments she shared with Comte Lecter. It was common knowledge that the former Sister had thought of the girl as a burgeoning student. And yet…

“Are you saying that you couldn’t see it either?”

She crumpled, righteous indignation gone. “I think I could. Ever since we arrived in Halamshiral, I occupied my time with training for combat and Abigail, but in the fleeting moments we saw each other, I knew something was off.”

They indulged their regret. “Every decision I made regarding Will came from the information I had about him from the young man himself and Comte Lecter’s guidance. Perhaps I was privy to some information that Will had not granted to his sponsor, but my perception and its depth or lack thereof is no excuse.”

Alana despaired, “He talked with Hannibal more than he did the rest of us. Hannibal had to know that something was wrong!”

“He mentioned something, but it wasn’t until too late. He suspected that a spirit inspired by Garrett Hobbs may have attached itself to Will.”

“Ha!” she scoffed, devoid of humor. “Of course! This all started with Hobbs.”

“Maybe it inspired Will to do what Hobbs couldn’t.” He took a deep breath and Alana stared at him, hoping that he wouldn’t continue, but the words needed to be said. Jack may not have thought much of Abigail Hobbs in life, but she didn’t deserve this. “Kill his daughter.”

Alana flinched, struck. “Abigail’s blood is on all of us.” She hesitated before continuing, warily eyeing Jack’s reaction. “So is Will’s.”

Solemnly and silently, Jack agreed. So was Will’s.

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Alana couldn't leave it like this, much as Beverly told her to stop there. When the Seekers had first brought Will to Red Crossing, and she had recognized him, Alana should have gotten him to leave. Guilt draped her soul and she just knew that if she had been more present and attentive to his condition these last few months, she could have done something. It was during times like these that she wanted to feel comfortable speaking with Beverly about her feelings, but Beverly was drowning on her own right now. They'd just compile their guilt on top of each other's until they both were buried.

Beverly had gotten to speak with him (brief as it was), but Alana hadn't. As soon as Jack gave the all clear, she went to. The rest of the squad tried to prevent her from going, but they weren't going to change her mind. She needed to do this. She needed to look in the face of the man she fated for execution.

Will was… he wasn't doing well. He sat upon the stone floor of the cell, arms chained together behind him in what must have been an uncomfortable amount of strain. He was leaning against the wall, pressed into the corner of the room, so she had trouble telling where the chain was attached, if it was at all. His skin was sallow and drawn. Hollow eyes looked up at her when the clicking of her boots stopped in front of the barred door. It was only holding, so he wasn't sealed off from anyone, but there were two full-fledged Seekers flanking it. Alana wanted them to leave, but knew it was pointless. They were here to keep Will from using magic, not that he really could do much without his arms to direct its energy.

"Hello," she said, quietly so as to not disturb him too much.

The sheer apathy in his gaze was appalling. "Hello, Alana." He was quiet for so long after that she almost spoke to fill the silence. "You're flushed; have you been yelling?" It was obvious, wasn't it?

"At Jack and it was more like screaming."

He snorted weakly. "I could use a good scream. I can feel one just perched under my chin."

She whispered, "Let it out."

Will rocked back slightly, shaking his head a desperate no. "If I let it out, I won't be able to stop. It will just keep going and going…" He trailed off. "I don't need another reason for them to want to keep me."

It made sense. From this moment on, Will's life was about self-preservation. She didn't believe that he killed anyone willingly; it didn't sound like him. It didn't matter though, some people were always chomping at the bit and they'd send someone after him. Freedom was nice and all, but better if a person was alive to enjoy it.

"How's Beverly?" he asked.

"She's hurt, but doing better." In a manner of speaking. "You're worried about her."

“We didn’t end things on the best of notes.”

She smiled, but it was somber. “She has the dogs. Beverly told me that someone that knew them needed to take care of them, at least until we get this figured out.”

He repeated her words slowly, “At least until we get this figured out.” Will shivered slightly, despite the room being fairly warm, if a little damp. “That could be a long time from now.”

“And we’ll have them until then. I made sure of it.” It had taken a long conversation with the provisional High Seeker and Jack, but she had.

“Thank you,” he whispered, but they both knew that even if this was ‘figured out’, there was a good chance that Will would never see the Mabari again. It was highly likely that at the end of this, guilty or not, Will would be spending the rest of his life in a Circle, one way or another. How long the rest of his life was depended on the outcome of the investigation and the quality of that life could depend greatly on it as well. There was a good chance that Will would be declared innocent but volatile and just as likely made Tranquil. Alana didn’t like thinking about that. “Why did you not leave on the best of notes with Beverly?”

The imprisoned young man stared. And stared. Then he stared some more before answering her, “I may have made romantic overtures. It wasn’t my best moment. Even with all of that, she wanted to stay friends. I may have been trying to avoid her before this mess.”

“Ah.” That made sense.

“My mind wasn’t in the best place; I realize that now.”

A curious sentiment. “I’ve always known you to be fairly level-headed, at least before all of this. It also isn’t like you to pursue romance.”

“It’s not just my story to tell,” he said and left it at that.

Well, it appeared that Alana would be asking Beverly a few questions.

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It appeared that Hannibal would have a good reason to be joining Bedelia in Verchiel and Val Royeaux after all. With Will moving to the White Spire there, he could spin it as taking responsibility for his ward, and the Comte would have an easier time assessing the pulse of politics from its capital. The Empress was long overdue a return to the seat of the Orlesian Empire, and he would be watching Celene’s progress from the shadows. The other nobles never cared for her thoughts of alliances and the promotion of culture and art instead of war, but that was their prerogative.

It would be more difficult to hide Abigail in Val Royeaux, but it was far more doable than in Halamshiral. At least there, he had a small, and more importantly private, estate. It’s optimal position also had to do with the fact that no one would expect him to try a murderous spectacle where he would be more likely to get caught, so when Will inevitably found out

and made accusations, he'd be able to deflect some of the suspicion. For now, Hannibal would settle for writing a letter to dear Bedelia.

'My dear Baronnes du Maurier de Ghislain,

You have often been my counsel, and for that I am grateful. In this particular time of my life, I found myself in need of it more than ever. For something this immediate while we are so far apart, I would normally call on Lady Bloom, but she has been occupied as of late. It seems that her own coping with this situation is to make herself more involved in it; I suspect that she will be joining the Seekers of Truth in an official capacity very soon.

My young ward, Mademoiselle Abigail Hobbs, has recently been murdered by my protege, Will of Clan Lavellan. We have spoken much about both of them, so you can see why the situation would upset me. Despite the overwhelming evidence witnessed by my own eyes, I still find myself searching for ways that Abigail could still be alive and Will blameless in this terrible tragedy.'

Grief was a funny thing. It was something for the individual. Every person grieved differently, the loss of a person a safer exploration of the meaning of a single life and its ending in the grand scheme of the universe. He knew what life meant; he saw it in the heaving breaths and wet begging in the final moments of those that he ended.

'In all the time that people have existed, so many lives have had beginnings and endings, but Abigail was a part of mine. It is hard to separate the meaning that she had to me from my own views on death. She impacted me in ways that I had not anticipated. I had begun to see her as my child more than my ward. This was the first time I found myself wanting that, understanding the appeal. In Abigail, I saw the opportunity to guide, support, and even direct another person's life. I was setting her on the path of adulthood At least, I hope I was. Never before had I thought about having a living legacy. My reputation is all that I thought would exist in the span of time beyond my death. More so after this loss do I find myself considering it and all that it means.

There is another loss that I am grieving as well. We have spoken of Will often, of how I enjoyed guiding him and watching his triumphs with the Seekers. The kind of influence I had with him wasn't the same as it was with Abigail, but it was a form of influence nonetheless. I have not given up on him yet. Regardless of his declared guilt (and it will be declared), he has so much potential. I believe that I can help him, solve him, and save him. I was trying so hard to save him before this unfortunate turn of events, but I was ignoring warning signs. In the end, I lost them both.

I believe that I simply need someone with whom I can speak on this matter. I hope this letter finds you well. I will be journeying to Verchiel shortly before my eventual departure to Val Royeaux. I know that you need a resting stop after you leave Halamshiral and I would be glad to entertain you the estate I recently acquired there.

Warmest regards,

Comte Hannibal Lecter'

Upon finishing his message, Hannibal allowed himself the briefest smirk. Hopefully, the note would arrive upon Bedelia's approach to the city in question. It would irk her to know that he was aware of her 'secret' estate in the capital and her need of a place in Verchiel. He would gladly extend her the kindness. His own depature to Val Royeaux would probably coincide with hers.

The summer winds would carry his messenger bird to her swiftly. Quickly, he needed to draft another message, this one to Nesiraya. The main estate needed to be prepared and she would need to inform Abigail of her new schedule. There was also the matter of the alternate estate that would need to be attended to sooner rather than later.

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Ichor dripped down her nose and onto her face. That's what caused her to open her eyes, and once she did, Abigail instantly regretted it. Above her, hovering only a couple of feet out of reach, was the suspended pieces of Georgia, blood and clumps of flesh sloughing off onto Abigail. Her friend's eyes were gone, face haphazardly stitched together. A thick, black tongue lolled out of her mouth; it was twitching slightly, but otherwise immobile.

Abigail may have imagined it, but the spasms almost looked like words. The mouth, distended and detached, seemed to be quivering. Georgia's corpse (and calling it a whole corpse was extremely generous) was trying to speak to her. Whispered breaths were audible and she tried to get closer.

"You've killed him."

She jerked away and the surface she had been lying on fell out from under her. Rolling on the floor away from the abyss, the young woman slammed into something soft. She jerked against it and whirled up and around. Levitated in the void was the trembling form of Will. He didn't seem to be aware of her, but Abigail tried to reach out to him anyway. There was no initial response. Then, in the place that she touched, scratch marks bloomed. She was frightened and so the younger brunette quickly moved her hand. It didn't work. Everywhere she touched, more scratches, a couple of bites, a bruise or two, and at least one gouge littered his skin. It was like she had desperately fought him.

Evidence Hannibal had asked her to plant and she had willingly subjected him to.

Abigail woke from the nightmare half-hanging out of the bed of her room in this inn in the middle of nowhere. Nesiraya had told her that they were going to Val Royeaux and that they needed to leave immediately for the trip and this was their first real night. It wasn't the fancy amenities that she had gotten used to in Halamshiral, but the straw mattress and itchy blanket were hardly unfamiliar. Gradually she pulled herself back onto the bed and laid in the darkness, silently hoping for some form of sleep to come to her.

It did not. The guilt hanging over her head kept her eyes open.

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Beverly looked at the decorations on the arrow, shocked and more than a little hurt. Will had often pulled out his bow and arrows when they talked about his Clan, and he would show her the careful fletching work that he employed to remind him of his old home. When she had asked him about it, the Dalish had admitted that, while he knew how to use a proper bow, it had been a long time. The weapon was more about a keepsake of his heritage than something that would get actual use. That was why, when she examined the arrows kept alongside the bow and noticed humanoid teeth and what was clearly hair (not fur) wrapped around the shaft like a good luck charm, a wave of betrayal crashed into her. The rest of the squad (Alana was part of the squad now thanks to three weeks on the road together) hovered behind her, in just as much disbelief as she.

She gulped slightly when Jack arrived with the rest of them. “Arrows typically don’t have this kind of decoration unless they are ceremonial. The Dalish tend to be very practical, so I always thought it was odd that Will bothered to adorn them. I wasn’t expecting the remains of people.”

Brian glared at them, seeming to want answers from the evidence in front of them. It never did speak to him like it did to Will, which the human always seemed to resent. Honestly, there was a reason he was supposed to stick to alchemy. “Will didn’t tell us much about his Clan, if he ever talked about them at all. It’s well-known that a few Dalish Clans tend to kill anybody that’s not an elf on sight.”

“Really?” Beverly demanded and he shrunk.

“You’ve heard about those weird ones with the red markings!”

“Will doesn’t have red vallaslin!”

“Whatever! The point is that despite him opening up to us, Will didn’t say much about his Clan.”

“He did to me,” she retorted. Alana glanced over at her. Both of them were clearly thinking about last night’s very long conversation. Beverly shared a lot about her friendship with Will and what she had been seeing and experiencing. After the evidence that she just found, Beverly definitely wished that she had said something sooner. The thought that this could have been happening all of this time and that she had been seeing signs of it was awfully debilitating.

That’s when Jimmy spoke up and she wished that he hadn’t. “He could have been lying. Maybe not about everything, but some.”

“We needn’t discuss any of it,” Jack replied, lost in his own thoughts.

“We needn’t?” Alana enunciated, clearly not following the bigger man’s train of thought. She would learn to get used to it; Jack did have some interesting moments that reminded her of Will… or maybe Will had moments that reminded her of Jack?

“The hair. The teeth. They’re all slightly different. Just different enough to be from different people. Will has the remains of more than one person and I have a good feeling on whom

these might belong to." He looked back at the confused team. "Go through his personal effects. I have a feeling we'll obtain personal belongings or further evidence of him being involved in the deaths of Marissa Schurr, Cassandra Boyle, Georgia Madchen, and Donald Sutcliffe."

"Personal belongings. Are you saying these are trophies?" their newest recruit asked. "Look! Something is wrong with him physically. We all know that he was getting sicker; this doesn't change that. He's not a murderer."

Brian snarked, "Well I think this says otherwise. Abigail isn't an isolated incident, just another victim. We thought that she was the Copy, maybe they were just working together. I bet she was going to expose him."

Silence filled the room as every other occupant projected contempt and irritation. Brian remained unrepentant. "Jack, You let the fox into the hen house and now he's played us all."

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Whatever Jack may think about Brian's attitude, he was right about one thing: Will was, without a doubt, Jack's responsibility.

Jack was the one that brought the elven man into the fold of the Seekers and didn't bother to fathom an outcome that wasn't favorable to the organization. Jack was the one that allowed him access to sensitive evidence and left him alone for periods at a time. Jack was the one that put him in vulnerable situations where he would be exposed to spirits, especially one as volatile as the echo of Garrett Hobbs. He hadn't told the others about that. It felt like it would be such a blatant mishandling to share Comte Lecter's thoughts with his unaware team. Better to not bias them now and share what was becoming a more and more present conclusion when he had backing for it.

What had transpired so far did leave him with one set conviction: Jack needed to arrest Will and it needed to be done soon. If the elf was arrested officially, that would put him in the custody of Seekers and at their judgement. No one would be able to claim him as a kill outside of a formal execution, which was a huge concern. So many young Seekers would be chomping at the bit to behead the human-killing, demon-loving, mage elf. Even with all that he had done, Jack still cared for the young man. That was a concerning factor that he would have to deal with later, preferably with Bella to talk him through it.

Back in the barracks. The Guard Captain was significantly less hostile about them taking it this time around; said something about duty and traitors and all that. The holding cell that they placed Will in was guarded by no less than two fully fledged Seekers, neither of which Jack knew personally. Once he arrived, the Senior Seeker nodded and they moved further down the hall to give them privacy.

Will was shackled to the wall, chains behind his back. At first he was staring blankly at the dirt floor, but when Jack approached, he looked up with a sad, resigned smile. "Hello Jack."

Seeing him like this hurt. "We're going to move you to a secure facility. I noticed that you are sick again so they're sending a healer to take care of you. From what I know, Senior

Enchanter Wynne requested access; she believes she has this figured out."

"I left far too soon. I see that now." Jack couldn't tell if that was sincere or not. "What happens after that? The Bastion and Chilton? The Spire and the Lord Seeker?"

Maybe Will thought he was being funny? This was no place for morbid humor, especially with his life on the line. "I appreciate the cynicism for what it is, but I've been trying to approach this from a different angle. Desperately, I've been holding onto optimism about your condition, despite what every shred of evidence is telling me."

The young man's face remained carefully blanke It didn't seem like the kind where someone was trying to hide something; Will simply didn't have the space left in him to emote. "I can't confess to something I don't remember," he finally said, but there was a measure of guilt hidden submerged under the surface.

"What else don't you remember?"

A startled expression overcame the elf's face. "What do you mean?"

"Your arrows."

"What about them? They don't really work, the decorations unbalance them. I only treat them like ceremonial ones to remind me of home. They're in a box, so they're not inconspicuous."

"We found humanoid remains on them, decorating the arrows like good luck charms."

Will's face changed in its blankness. It still was hiding emotion, but something had fundamentally altered in its appearance. Jack was still trying to figure out what that was when Will replied, "No." It was a whisper, still dripping in the air.

"From what we found, they appear to be four different people. There was a small bit of other evidence, cloth, personal effects, and such, that led the Seekers to believe that the four were Cassandra Boyle, Marissa Schurr, Donald Sutcliffe, and Georgia Madchen," Jack spoke firmly, confronting Will with the reality of the situation.

"No. No no no no," Will began saying, faster and faster. "No. I wasn't sick when the Boyle girl was murdered. I was sick when Marissa Schurr was murdered!"

Jack put a hand up, trying to get Will to stop. "Don't say that. Not to me, not right now."

"Because then I would have killed two people knowingly. I would have done those horrible things to them."

The Seeker sighed. "Yes."

He finally realized what was on Will's face. It was horror and now he was watching it twist and morph into a dawning realization. "I didn't do it."

Jack started to explain that just saying 'I didn't do it' really didn't give a person a solid defense in the eyes of the law, but Will continued. "I didn't, but you need to worry about who

did.” He raised an eyebrow, which Will took as permission. “Whoever is doing this to me, they’ll be close to you, probably someone here, among the Seekers. They’d be working with you and would know everything about the cases. They would know me too and my reputation.”

He stared at the elf for a moment. “Do you hear how paranoid you sound?”

His only reply was a sad, broken smile. “I thought it was the job of the Seekers to ultimately root out corruption and threats to order. Isn’t paranoid in the job description?”

“You’re not a Seeker, Will,” Jack said and watched the young man crumble.

He mumbled, “It could be you. Then I’d be pretty fucked, wouldn’t I?”

He didn’t want to have to do this, but Will wasn’t going to say anything else. This was for Will’s protection over the course of the next couple of weeks, and for Jack’s peace of mind. With each passing moment, his heart broke a little more at watching someone he had worked with and thought of as part of his family going through this, doing this. As much as he hadn’t wanted to believe it, Will wasn’t responding the way an innocent would. Will was right, it was a Seeker’s job to root out corruption and threats to order.

“Will of Clan Lavellan, you are under arrest for murder.”

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Various Templars surrounded Will, more or less dragging him off. Jack had watched only so far as to see him dragged around a corner and then left the caravan to its own devices. As soon as the Senior Seeker of Truth was out of sight, the armored thugs around him became much rougher with his restraints. Honestly, was it too much to ask for a bit of decorum? Apparently it was, or at least the one that shoved him face first into the covered cart thought so. Will’s shins were now scraped and covered with clay as he tried to get his feet back under him without the use of his arms. Laughing was coming from behind him.

Someone snapped him back up and the elf was acutely aware of the slick feeling around his wrists, which previously had been dry and chapped. It appears that the chafing had finally caused his skin to break. The person that had ahold of the back of his shirt yanked him to his feet and half carried him inside. A far memory curled into Will’s brain, someone being pushed into a cart like this and managing his escape. There was a lot more murder in that memory than Will felt comfortable with, but the dance steps were still familiar.

Another Templar stepped inside of the cart, the weight of the vehicle leaning with the heavy armor. Anything Will tried to do would have to get in between the plates or require him using that kind of weight against his opponent. A few kicks and some head trauma would probably do the trick. Templar number two was stepping inside at this very moment while it sounded like another two were going around to the front. There wasn’t going to be a rear guard.

Will may not be strong, but he was smart and he was fast. If he managed to do this before the door closed, there was a strong chance that he would never even encounter the other two. This had to be timed just right...

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“Apparently Will’s been holding out on us. He broke his thumb getting out of his restraints and managed to overwhelm and disarm his guards before they could lock him up. According to them, he was proficient in some hand to hand combat or at least very desperate,” Jack informed his team as well as the present Comte Lecter. “These are not the actions of an innocent man.”

“Jack!” Alana exclaimed. “We already know that he’s sick and-” She glanced over at Beverly, who nodded. “Even you admitted that it was very likely that he was under the influence of a spirit.”

Jack regretted telling Alana slightly; he had only been trying to comfort her, but that information was not privy to the boys yet. Brian and Jimmy shifted. Even Lecter looked slightly uncomfortable with the words being said aloud. If all of this lined up, then there was a chance that Will as a soul was innocent, but it would still be Will’s body that committed such heinous acts. At that point, it didn’t matter to the boss; if Will somehow killed all of those people, whether or not it was his intention or wish, he was guilty. They still held people accountable for their actions under the influence of demons, even those possessed. While Jack had never personally agreed with that approach, he understood the idea that, once possessed, a person could not come back. “That was just a theory. What makes you so confident?”

Beverly came forward. “On more than one occasion, Will confided in me that he had lost time and he wasn’t feeling like himself. I didn’t speak up before, because that should have been Will’s responsibility. I didn’t want to infringe on his independence.”

There was nothing really to say beyond that. While Jack hadn’t known to what extent this had been going on, he had also held back to allow Will his space. “It seems that was a mistake.” He was speaking to himself just as much. “Considering that several people are dead.”

The Comte butted in, “Even knowing that, I saw Will clear for extended periods of time. We have no way of knowing whether this is a point of clarity or confusion, let alone whether the murders were either.”

“We know that he isn’t possessed,” Jack began. “If he was, Will would have already become an abomination, which tend to be more obvious if not overtly monstrous. Most people under the influence of demons and spirits also have a certain degree of control over themselves; the demon simply pushes in strong urges to the point where they seem like mind control.”

“We don’t know that! Demonology is still a new area of study.”

Jack continued, ignoring Beverly’s interruption. “We also know that he claims to have experienced lost time, which is typical of possession, not influence. Is it possible for a demon to possess him for small periods of time and then leave when it’s done?”

Hannibal, strangely enough the most well-versed in the bunch and didn’t that just bite at Jack, answered his question, “Not that any of us know. Periods of lost time and then clarity of self usually come from those that have a symbiotic relationship with their inhabitant, each taking

over for a set duration. That sort of relationship requires awareness on the part of the inhabited as the inhabitant might communicate with them or affect strong emotions even when receded."

"Is it possible for him to have this relationship and not realize it? I'm asking about Will specifically."

Alana shrugged and spoke, though she was not the person he wanted to hear from, "We don't understand Will's mind. Dreamers are such unexplored territory and furthermore he is incredibly sick. Maybe the illness left him open to influence and he's been so ill that he doesn't realize what's happening."

"He did ask me one time if I could help him gauge what was real," Beverly explained to the class. "It's very possible that the spirit was messing with him and his brain just didn't translate it."

"He could also have been lying." Jack turned to Hannibal and gave him a soft look, displeased with Brian's insensitive comment.

"I don't like this anymore than the rest of you, but we need to get him back. It doesn't matter if Will understands what's going on or doesn't, right now he is a danger to himself and others. We need to bring him in, or someone else is going to get hurt."

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Beverly called the dogs that were mingling around the side of the cart. She had chosen to stay in 'Will's Shack' as she dubbed it so that they wouldn't get too much of a change in scenery. After learning that Will had escaped, she was doubting everything that she knew about him. He had been a friend, her best friend even. After the awkward incident with this kiss, they had quickly moved past it while maintaining a good relationship. At least that's what she had thought; Alana said otherwise. He had been pulling away from her, keeping her in the dark more and more in the last month or so. It had hurt to watch her friend withdraw, but she had also thought that she had known what it was about. Apparently, she had been wrong.

Alana had offered to stay with her, and Beverly had initially denied it. It felt wrong to allow someone else into his space, but it was Alana. If there was anyone else he would have alloed, it would be her. She wasn't home yet, because Jack had kept her late, but there was little doubt that she wouldn't be back soon.

FInally, the Seeker managed to get the hounds inside. Will had always been very insistent about the term. All except one, that is. Winston only stared at her, refusing to cross the threshold. It reminded her of the stories they told about Mabari: how they only bonded to one person, how they were extremely intelligent, how they were bred by magic, and how they could sense evil. With all that had happened here, Beverly had no doubt that the aura of this place must resonate with some sort of malice. She called once, then twice more, before the Mabari finally came inside.

Upon entering, she began shedding her belongings and kneeled down to feed the hounds. The quiet only lasted a few more seconds before the hairs on the back of her neck began tingling.

“Beverly,” Will breathed out, and she stood from her crouched position slowly. From what she could tell by the sound, he was in the far corner to her back left. Shit! She had told him about her weak points in combat before, blindspots and such. When they were originally discussing such a thing, it had been so that they could help each other out. He had said that close combat was where he struggled, but, considering the state of the Templars they had found earlier, was clearly more competent at it than he had suggested, magic or no. If she were to take that away from him, Beverly had no clue how he would react. Odds were in the favor of violence though; no mage liked their magic taken away.

Beverly turned to look at him. He appeared a lot more wild than she expected (and she had expected a lot). His curling hair had half the forest in it; his eyes were wide and a little bloodshot. His entire body seemed to be incapable of staying still, vibrating in place. She took a hesitant step forward and watched him skitter back, keeping a careful distance between them.

“Please don’t yell,” he pleaded, voice still hushed. A few of the hounds started to crowd him, making him retreat further. It was strange to not see him immediately allowing them to bowl him over, but he stayed put. “Hate to break it to you, but putting it like that makes me wonder if I should.”

“I’ll stay over here,” came rushing out as he pushed himself further, practically pressing himself into the wall. “If that makes you feel better, I'll stay near this wall.”

“Better isn’t an option, Will. You can’t be here.”

He hesitated. “I-I know. I won’t bother you for long. I just needed to see you after the incident in the barracks. Everything went by so fast and I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

“That’s why you escaped?” she asked, hoping the doubt and sarcasm creeped in. Will gave her a small smile, the one that always preceded a joke, but otherwise didn’t speak. Instead, he gently curved his body towards the front door, taut as a bow string. “No.” The silence stretched until the humor was pulled too far out. “I only wanted to get my bearings. It always helps to talk with you.”

Beverly needed to do this delicately; Will had to return to the Seekers’ custody or else some high-strung jackass was going to see his lack of chains as an order to shoot to kill. Not that he would care about it that much; Will probably thought it a preferable alternative to actually going to a Circle. Alana... Alana was going to be there soon. Jack would probably be escorting her so that they could ‘talk’. If she could stall him, talk him down, then they would be the ones to grab him again.

“It’s good to see the dogs too,” Will continued after too much silence. “I thought I wasn’t going to see them again.”

“Will,” she started, trying not to sound so reluctant. He would pick up on that so fast his response would make her head spin. “Wynne seemed to be worried about you while we communicated. She seemed to think that she could help. If you are really so worried about getting your bearings and understanding the world again, why not wait until she can treat

you? Everything you're feeling, all of the doubt and confusion, it can all go away. If you let it."

He sobbed out a laugh. "If I let it? If I don't find out who is doing this to me, I'll be going away. They already think I did it and they are so sure that they've got me understood. They'll say I have a problem, that they know what it is and that it can be fixed, but they will be wrong. They'll try again and again, but will only get more incorrect each time. All they will know is that I'm wrong."

Her heart broke a little more with each word. "I don't know how to help you."

"I didn't kill anyone," Will said firmly, pressing the words into the air.

She heard the sound of walking outside. It was very faint, but Alana was on her way, Jack most likely by her side. If she got Will out now, it would be three against one. The unpredictability of removing his magic would lose any threat with two other people there, but until they were all in line of sight, this still was a balancing act. He could easily kill her before they got in, given the right set of circumstances. "Okay," she gave him. Beverly took one, two, then three large steps away from the door, giving him plenty of space to leave the room. "I believe you. Go ahead and leave, but please come back. We're worried."

Will smiled and started forward, but his entire body froze after he moved a single pace. The elf retreated into himself and zipped to an area with an unseen window. Naturally he had had to get in somehow. "That was clever. Someone's outside, aren't they?"

"Why didn't I shout for help if there has been someone outside?"

"Because I proved that I didn't need magic to take care of mage hunters. I could have hurt you, even killed you, before they got through the door."

She didn't want to tell him that he was right, so she didn't speak. 'Dareth shiral, Beverly.' Then, he was gone.

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The meeting with Beverly had hurt. Stung, really. She was supposed to be his best and dearest friend, but even she didn't believe in him. His friend would have been willing to throw him to wolves without regard for what might have happened to him after. If his own mission to find the corruption among the ranks wasn't so vital, Will might have let them have him just to watch the regret on her face. As it was, he was doing his job. A Seeker was supposed to locate and ferret out corruption within the system and threats to order and eliminate them. He may not be a Seeker, but that was the job he would have chosen. He was only trying to aid them by getting rid of this nuisance and danger.

So, Will chose to go to a place that wouldn't kick him out. He had learned the guard rotations fairly well with all of the times that he was here before, and they hadn't changed. It was of little difficulty for him to sneak into Comte Lecter's estate a short way away from Red Crossing. Once he was inside, Will worked around security to get into his study, and then he waited.

It didn't take too much longer for Comte Lecter to be there. Will was positive that his old sponsor knew that he was in the room the moment that he entered, but the silence between them was allowed to linger. It settled in the room as Hannibal worked through paperwork and checked on his holdings. It was only after a decent twenty minutes of quiet that his Lordship looked up. "Hello, Will." Their eyes met. "How are you feeling?"

After the day he's had? "Clear." After all, Will now knew what everyone thought of him. He could now see where he fit in among these people and this big wide world. There were still some puzzle pieces missing, but Will could now see the vague shapes of their outlines and knew where their gaps were located. "Self aware." How could he be anything but? The picture the puzzle was making was mostly filled; Will saw the end game (as much as he could) and finally understood his place in it.

"You gave everyone quite a scare."

He scoffed, "Everyone else is confused about who and what I am, which I can relate to." Will moved his gaze down to the man that had remained calm and collected, despite what Will was capable of. Either Comte Lecter was a very smart or very stupid man. "What do you think? Are you confused?"

Hannibal smiled, more genuinely than Will had probably ever seen. It was small, barely existent, but still there nonetheless. "I'm not confused, merely skeptical. I'm willing to change my mind should the evidence change." There was a lot of that being thrown around.

"Do you believe I killed Abigail?"

"It's entirely possible, if not nearly indisputable based on what has been discovered."

"If it had just been Abigail, I would have believed it." Had he seen a twitch or imagined it? Were his eyes playing tricks? They did that more often than not now. "Hobbs had haunted me so much that I could have believed he mutated my waking thoughts and sleeping thoughts in equal measure. After that first connection, I sometimes felt like I was more in his head than out, even after he was dead."

Hannibal moved closer to where Will had been holed up. "It wasn't just Abigail, though. Was it, Will?"

It hadn't been and that was too much. "I know who I am," Will put out in the world, hoping if the words became real then their meaning would manifest itself.

"No. All sense of who you were has been distorted by your illness and the spirits that you were interacting with. At this moment, you are clear and self-aware, but that isn't always the case."

No, it wasn't always the case, but until recently he had been able to keep it separate. Sure, his mind was overflowing with strange visions and experiences, but he was still Will. This started eight months ago and for a good five to six of them, Will had still been relatively certain of his identity. In fact, it had only really started hurting a little over a month ago. Ill or not, visions or not, prior to the incident with Georgia Madchen, Will had been relatively

confident in his identity and individuality. “Because of that slip-up, I know that I didn’t kill any of them. I know it, but the evidence is there and someone is making sure that no one believes me.” Not even Beverly and not even you he did not say. It didn’t feel like it needed to be said.

An audible sigh reached his ears as Hannibal moved slightly in his direction. It wasn’t enough to impede his space, but it still took him back. “If we need to prove that you didn’t commit these murders, perhaps we should consider how you could have and then disprove that.” That was one way to do it, Will supposed.

Will came closer slightly, still maintaining a careful stretch of distance between them. Hannibal took a step back and then he stepped forward, over and over until they were both seated across from each other. He felt naked in his rugged sleep clothes. His leather armor was still back in the barracks, one less layer of protection between himself and the outside world.

“If you are this killer, the identity runs through these events like a thread through pearls. Cassandra Boyle would have been your first victim; you said her crime scene was practically gift wrapped.” The room darkened, shadows playing through his eyes. They manifested in raven’s feathers, patched together unfathomably. The caws were audible in his mind, Dirthamen’s servants clouding and unclouding his vision: Fear and Deceit.

But Dirthamen tamed them and he was dedicated to Dirthamen. They were meant to aid him, and Will refused to let them control him. He would decipher the truth behind their lies. “It told me everything that I needed to know.” And they would too.

Just behind the manifestation, will could barely make out a pair of antlers, twisting and prowling in the blighted corners of the room.

“You had seen one of Hobbs’ victims, knew how he killed. It is possible that you may have been exploring how he killed to better understand who he was.”

“I was staying at an inn, surrounded by Seekers. Someone would have noticed me.”

Hannibal chuckled. “We’ve already established that you can be fairly stealthy, especially where Seekers are concerned. You could easily have found her and taken care of her during the night with them none the wiser.”

Will argued against it, “I know I didn’t kill her.”

“Why?” Hannibal asked, so deceptively simple. “What makes you so sure?” Before Will could retort, Hannibal continued, “What about the young Marissa Schurr? She was so much like Abigail; you may have wondered why Garrett Hobbs did not go after her himself.”

The feathers swirled at Hannibal’s words and formed the hanging still of Marissa. It was suspended over him, hair eerily patchy with the individual plumes instead of the normal fringe that hair required. He could almost smell the blood drops, inky and oddly shaped as they were. Slowly, it morphed into the nearly decapitated Healer Sutcliffe, face eternally

frozen in horror. “And Healer Sutcliffe? He was murdered how you imagined yourself murdering a woman only days before.”

“Like Georgia,” Will breezed, pulled into a trance by his Lordship’s words. The swirling plumage pulled his brain into a place that let him drift away. His thoughts were floating by, trying to decipher the meaning of these images. He was foggy; maybe he shouldn’t have left the healers those days ago. Would Abigail still be alive? Would he still feel like this? “She said that she dreamt I killed him, but she couldn’t see my face.” Was it a warning or a hint? “And then she was murdered.”

“You catch these killers by connecting with them on an intimate level. You communicate and join with the spirits left behind by them, emotions so strong they inspired whole other beings. For someone as empathetic as yourself, these leave a mark, dig into your mind and plant themselves there.” The feathers receded, leaving only the looming antlers in the dark. They were still there, barely visible in the gloom and hovering behind Comte Lecter. He winced, trying to shake the image from his head.

It was gone. “I’m trying to help you,” Hannibal said, so genuine that it almost confused him. For a moment… It was nothing.

“Take me to where Abigail died,” Will replied. This was something he needed to see, resolute in his purpose. He needed to understand what happened and where he fit in it. Hannibal was wrong, Will was still convinced that he didn’t commit the rest of the murders, even without sufficient evidence. There wasn’t enough to say that he did either, not really. “Take me to the Hobbs house.”

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Alana stormed in on Beverly and Jack discussing the incident with Will. Upon arrival, she had told them about Will’s recent visit. Quite literally, he was there only a minute or two before. Alana had been sent out to quickly check the perimeter to see if he didn’t go too far and maybe get a heading, but she was not remotely an experienced tracker. When she came back, both of them were speaking in hushed tones, trying to keep information from leaking out of the abode and to the recruited Templars and Seekers (despite the lack of presence). It was during times like these that Alana thought Seekers were far too paranoid. She understood that they were hoping that this would be handled quietly. If they managed to find Will first, there was a much smaller chance that he would be killed on sight.

“What in the Void are we going to do?” she declared as she arrived. Both of the full Seekers glared at the novice, which Alana was not used to.

“We’re trying to figure out where Will would go next,” Jack said plainly. “He apparently didn’t give Beverly too many clues about his next location.”

“And why would he?” Beverly demanded. “I was a little freaked out, I’ll admit, but I shouldn’t have spoken so harshly or tried to trick him. I only managed to drive him away and prevent him from trusting me. If I hadn’t, he might have told me where he was planning to go.”

“Regretting rarely solves problems. We can only move forward with what information we are given.” Jack’s declaration in response actually lifted Alana’s spirits a tiny bit. Her… former friend clearly had a goal. He had the presence of mind to go to Beverly and probably request aid. Unfortunately, she was right about her response having negative repercussions. It was very likely that it isolated him from any of the other Seekers as well.

Alana mused out loud, “If he went to Beverly, it’s very likely that he is looking for someone else’s aid. I don’t think he would put her reputation in jeopardy if he thought it was important.”

Beverly seemed to follow her train of thought. “So, if he didn’t think he could trust me or the Seekers, where would he go?”

“Comte Lecter,” concluded Jack. “Will put a great deal of trust in him prior to this escapade. Odds are that if he didn’t feel like he could trust any of us, that is where he would go next.” Their leader paused for a second, as if he was considering something and wasn’t quite sure whether he should share it or not. The moment passed. “I have a feeling that if he’s trying to recruit someone and went immediately to Hannibal next, then he wants someone to take him to the Hobbs’ house.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You once said that Will asked you to help him gauge what was real and what wasn’t. Right now Will is in severe denial about his part in the death of Abigail Hobbs. He might want to go there to see where she probably died. Someone else there would give him a handhold. It’s probably that even without broken trust in the Seekers, he would have gone to Hannibal next anyway. After all, the man was there with him during his first violent encounter there.”

“Would Hannibal actually go with him?” Alana incredulously questioned. Then, she reconsidered. “Of course he would.”

Admittedly, that wasn’t really a question. Hannibal couldn’t accept the idea of Will killing Abigail anymore than Will could. Going to where Abigail would have died would be just as much for him as it would be for Will. It is important to get closure when one can. What was more scary was the potential for Will to do something he might regret. “We need to consider that Will might kill Hannibal and not even know he was doing it! If he’s attached to a spirit of Garrett Hobbs and is going back to his resting place-”

Jack’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly. “It might become active and try to take over or influence Will into behaving violently.”

“We need to go!” Beverly rushed out and began packing her supplies to go help their friend.

Jack stopped her. “I need to go. You two stay here in case he comes back. This is ultimately my responsibility. I’m not avoiding it this time.”

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The room smelled strongly of breakfast when he went inside. Eggs, bacon, and baking bread wafted into his nose and lingered, making him think of home. The Dalish lived simply and bacon and eggs were luxuries, but he still remembered makeshift bread made over the open fire and how it filled the camp with its scent. Further into the home he went until he saw Louise cooking the eggs, bacon set aside for later. Abigail was setting the table while keeping careful watch of the bread. He felt tense, on edge, like something was going to happen at any moment.

Noise came from outside and both he and Abigail startled. They could just see out of the window that a cart had stopped and two men were getting out. She looked up at him and asked, “Dad, is this about what the man at the herbalist’s said?”

“Will.”

It was strange to hear his name and also feel like it was not his at once.

“Will.’

He opened his eyes.

“We’re here,” Comte Lecter said and got off of the horse they were riding. He extended a hand up to Will who was already dropping off. “I’m surprised you managed to sleep.”

Will shrugged, “You learn to sleep through travel anyway you can.”

They stood before the Hobbs’ home, both recalling the memories of the last time that they had been there. Will gulped, already dreading what might be found. It seemed strange to say, but he didn’t want to go inside. As long as he went in, there was a chance that Abigail wasn’t dead or at least he wasn’t the one that killed her. Going into that house would make it real and take away the ambiguity forever. What he wanted didn’t matter, because what was far more vital was learning the truth of what happened, for better or for worse.

He hesitated only a moment longer before entering, the dried paint accusation of ‘Cannibals’ still hanging in his periphery. Hannibal soon followed.

The inside of the house was much worse than the last time. Age will do that. The ceiling was nearly completely rotted in and there was blood everywhere. Some of it was old and stained, some of it… was very very new. In the kitchen, where Will encountered Abigail the very first time, the walls were coated with great spurts of blood. It was the same again, only successful this time. A whispered voice came to his ear, “Are we going to re-enact the crime?”

He looked briefly into the living area, where Abigail had said those words over half a year ago. Hannibal was standing in the exact same spot as he did then, Will could sense it. Phantom Abigail appeared before his eyes and stared directly at Hannibal before she turned her head to Will, eyes boring into his skull. “You be my dad, she’ll be my mom, and he’ll be the messenger.” She disappeared. Hannibal was busy examining the walls, so it is possible that she was never there in the first place. A tiny pinprick expanded in his mind, suspicion finally dawning and those missing puzzle pieces showed their faces.

He turned to Hannibal, “Are we going to re-enact the crime?”

His travelling companion tilted his head, “If it would help you.”

Will muttered, “It may come to that,” and pushed forward into the shadows of the kitchen, darker and colder than it was a few minutes ago. The heat had been plucked from the air, the characteristic light humidity of summer drained. The southern areas of Thedas are not particularly hot, even in this season, but it was still warmer than usual. None of it was here. The scent of blood stung his nostrils until he could taste it between breaths.

“It’s as if she was fated to die here. Nothing we did was able to change that.”

Will turned to Hannibal, watching him go from horrified to destroyed. There was a minute faltering in the expression. Will had never seen it before, but he was paying attention now. Hannibal bowed his head, but there was a subtle smugness in his posture. “They haven’t found her body.”

Will retorted flatly, “Just the one piece.”

“If it is true that a spirit of Garrett Hobbs inspired you, you would have honored every part of her. There would be nothing left to find.” Will said nothing. “Perhaps you didn’t come here looking for a killer. Perhaps you came here to find yourself; this room harbors a death, a kill that you made.”

“I stared at Hobbs and the space opposite me assumed the shape of a man filled with dark and swarming flies.” He furrowed his brows, swirling raven feathers settling in the back of his brain. “I scattered them.”

“Where other men see and fear their isolation, yours has become understandable to you.” Hannibal hovered closer, getting right behind him. “You are alone, because you are unique.”

“I am alone as you are,” he replied and a fully formed thought replaced his suspicions. Why this line of thinking?

“If you followed the urges you kept down for so long, cultivated them as the inspirations that they are, you’d become someone other than yourself. Spirits would have no influence over you.”

“I know who I am,” Will stated, putting out his ideas in the world. For the first time in a month, he knew it was true. His Lordship had gone too far and left himself exposed. Intimate moments, pieces of time, came together and showed him the clear picture, puzzle clicking into place. “I’m not so sure I know who you are anymore, but I am certain one of us killed Abigail.” He was certain that Hannibal had. The mage turned to Hannibal and took a cautious step back. He didn’t have any armor and he didn’t have any weapons, but there hadn’t been a Seeker or Templar around him in a decent amount of time. His magic had long since come back, though he hadn’t thought he needed it before.

Civilians often made the mistake of believing that mages needed a staff or focus to channel their power. That was not the case; all they needed was willpower, and he had plenty. While

he put space between them, Will raised his hands slowly, knowing that the threat of the gesture would be clear to someone as educated as Comte Lecter.

“Will,” the monster opposite him drawled. “Is this really necessary?”

“I think it is.”

“You would kill me? You. RIght now. This man standing in front of me; is this who you really are?”

Will drew his magic to him, allowing it to play around his finger tips, sparks of energy flowing through him as he called reality to shape around him. The power pulled through the Veil, pooling it around him. “I am who I’ve always been. What about you? You came without a mask, a physical one at least. I think there’s one you never take off.” Hannibal didn’t say anything and he didn’t move. “You were the messenger. While I was busy you saw Hobbs and snuck off to talk to him. Abigail recognized you; she knew. So you kept her secrets, until- until what? Until she found out some of yours.”

His Lordship took a cautious step forward, which prompted Will to retreat again. He needed to understand. “You said that if felt good to kill Garrett Hobbs. Would if feel good to kill me now?” Was this some kind of negotiation? If the Comte was trying to talk him down, he was doing a poor job of it.

Will didn’t hear the footsteps coming in the house.

“Garrett Hobbs was a murderer. Are you a murderer, your Lordship?” He spat out the title, bitter on his tongue. Hannibal had the gall to look offended at his refusal to call him by name.

He was practically pouting (at least for Comte Lecter). “What reason would I have?”

Will expelled a shaky breath, finally recognizing the man across from him for who he was. It felt like running a marathon. It felt like being gutted. “You didn’t have a traceable motive, which is why you were so hard to see!” Breathing came fast, hiding another man in the house. “You were just curious what I would do. Someone like me, a mage, an elf, a dreamer. You wanted to observe the way i experienced the world, play with my mind. Wind him up and watch him go. Light the fire and let him burn.” The magic was stronger now, and Hannibal eyed the brightening glow warily. “If I’m going to go down in flames, I’m making sure that you’re coming with me!”

Jack Crawford appeared from the innard of the house, spilling forth into the kitchen. He moved to their side, occupying the space between them without directly blocking either man. “Will,” he cautioned, a wary hand stretched outwards.

A frantic burst shook Will. He needed to get out the spell before Jack could stop him. Grabbing at the last threads of energy, the mage pushed the magic into the world, trying to crush his targett and grind him into the floor. Just before the last string could connect, all energy left him. Jack had drained his mana just in time.

Will was left staring at his hands in disbelief, in shock at his failure. He didn't notice the sword pommel cracking into his skull as he slumped in the corner of the room. Bleary eyes looked up at the other two men, shapes blurring in and out of his vision.

"See?" he wheezed out, watching as Hannibal became the creature of his visions, a lanky and elongated man made of shadow and polished obsidian. The eyes were dead beneath jagged antlers rebelling against the sky. His head rolled and Will looked directly at Jack. "See?"

Then he saw nothing.

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Shortly after Jack knocked out Will, the back-up he had requested arrived. The Seeker took it upon himself to carry the unconscious young man to the cart where they would be moving Will to a place to get healing. Jack had insisted on it, despite the other Seekers questioning his motives. Most of those in the Order would claim that he had gotten rid of a rogue mage and should have left Will to die or made sure to finish the job. Jack himself had done so on many occasions. This time, Will's case was personal, and he was going to make sure to see it through. There was going to be a thorough investigation, and Jack was going to ensure that he got fair treatment.

He refused to leave Will's side during the entire cart ride to the nearby Chantry. He was making sure to dampen Will's magic so that no one could claim he didn't have a reason to be there. This was his own version of standing watch: Jack would make sure that no one hurt Will and that he hurt no one else. Once there, the Chantry Sisters scattered. Wynne had followed shortly behind them when she had heard what had happened and took it upon herself to optimize Will's care. He admired her determination to see the job through. When asked, she told him that she saw Will as a confused young man and that most people heard the word 'abomination' and went running when the situation was much more nuanced and delicate than all that.

Jack didn't say it, but he had a feeling that she spoke from experience. The Senior Enchanter was helping Will, so he left it alone.

Almost immediately after Will was settled, Hannibal arrived. This was one of the few times that he had seen the man without a mask. It occurred to him that he wasn't wearing one when Will had taken him back to the Hobbs' home, but by this point his Lordship had had time to go home and change before coming back here. He seemed oddly vulnerable.

"How is he?" the noble asked, face twisted in concern for his once protege and friend. There had been rumors among the court that they had been something more, but Jack had known Will well enough to say otherwise. Seeing the way the Comte was looking at Will now, the Seeker of Truth wondered if Lecter had hoped for something like that. Jack would have put a stop to it somehow, not out of fear but because it would have been a highly unequal relationship and there was a high chance Will would have felt pressured into it, but that was then and this was now. It must have hurt the other man immensely for Will to threaten him like that. He imagined that the whole situation must have been upsetting.

“Responding. More or less,” Jack replied, trying to give comfort, but be realistic at the same time. “They expect him to make a substantial recovery in time.” They both looked over to the sleeping elf, oblivious to the turmoil and chaos happening beyond his dreaming mind. “Senior Enchanter Wynne claims to have found the connection between the twisted spirit inspired by Hobbs and Will and at least blocked it. She said that a full separation would need to be done but would require Will’s cooperation and some serious work. Good on you for suggesting that; she might not have been able to do this much without that knowledge, guess as it may have been.” The silence blanketed them. Neither man wanted to make it real, but denial only worked for so long. “If he had not threatened you, would you have gone to the house with him?” Jack asked. He had to.

Hannibal hesitated before capitulating. “I would have wanted to.” He broke Jack’s gaze and moved on to study the resting face of their younger friend. “Even now I feel that I’ve failed to satisfy my obligation to Will.”

Obligation was such a funny thing. “I feel the same way.” Much as he didn’t want to, this was on his hands. “Do you have any regrets?” Jack had many.

“More than I care to admit.” The noble left it at that. Jack didn’t feel like pressuring him.

“Will isn’t your victim,” he tried to reassure, but it probably didn’t sound as genuine as it should have.

“Nor is he yours.” The sentiment was appreciated, though it was a lie. Jack had a feeling that he would never stop believing that Will was his victim.

“In my life, I’ve seen some hideous and off-handed ways in which the world breaks people. This is worse than anything I’ve seen, whether it be in the halls of power or an alley in a slum. What I’ve experienced with Will has caused an earthquake in me. I am not the same man I was yesterday.”

Hannibal refused to look at him. “No one in this room is.”

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“Good evening!” Hannibal greeted Bedelia, pleased that she agreed to his little visit to her suite. Not that she really had much say in anything at the moment as she was staying in his estate. He would be extremely grateful to the late Lord Froideveaux for leaving it (and all of his assets) to him in his will. The scrutiny that he received at court for the little stunt was well worth this moment. Behind him stood several servants, all carrying dishes that he had created specifically for this meal.

“You honor me with your presence, Comte Lecter,” she forced out. A quick bow of her golden head and she moved aside to let him into her space. He happily invaded.

Once the servants set down the food, he sent them away and began plating it. Bedelia, naturally, served her own wine for the meal after he recommended a vintage that would pair well. She studied from across the room. Once the table was set, he gestured between the two of them to the table.

“Tête de Veau en Sauce Verte paired with Agregio Pavali. An interesting choice,” she observed. “It smells like a bonfire.”

“I smoked the veal on a pyre of dry hay. It imparts a unique smoldering flavor to the meat and the room.” He had wanted to give Abigail the funeral she deserved for the life left behind, Andrastian style no less. This was the best way he knew how. Originally, he had wanted to share the meal with Abigail, but this was meant to be her simulacrum. It felt wrong to have her eat it, thus the visit to Bedelia. He had other motives, of course, but that was definitely the reason he pushed for food to be involved.

“This is an unexpected treat,” Bedelia spoke, voice flat and betraying her own irritation at his drop in.

He smiled, lips turning up and eyes alighting. “Thank you for indulging me.”

She cut any chatter, “When you asked me for this, you sounded like you needed to speak. You went through all of the trouble to even deliver the invitation yourself rather than through a messenger. What’s on your mind?”

“For one, this is the only way I could cook for you. You’ve refused any invitations to my table prior.” It had been rather frustrating. How much should he reveal to Bedelia? It’s not like she would really tell anyone - she hadn’t so far- but he was not in the line of work to make too many gambles. Telling her now could risk certain information flowing faster than it should. Although…

She was leaving to Val Royeaux on the morrow. Perhaps it wouldn’t be too much of a wager. “I’m planning on seeing Will before he leaves for the Spire. Preferably, the journey will be tomorrow and I would leave for the capital shortly after.”

He loved the way she stared, almost like she couldn’t believe the words coming out of his mouth. “For what reason?”

“As a farewell. Of sorts. The Will that I knew was an illusion disguising his true self. Whether he sees it or not is his own issue. The White Spire is also notoriously well guarded.”

She pointed a fork at him, not menacingly. “For one with as much money and standing as you, informal or not, it would be easy.”

“It would be too easy in the eyes of some. Any visit I made without substantial work would lead to judgements and assumptions about both of us.”

“The dance that you two had with the Seekers nearly destroyed him. He had to create his own version of reality to help him make sense of what happened.”

“And what he did.”

She still hadn’t touched her food. “I thought that Will of Clan Lavellan would be the protege that cost you your life. You’ve had many proteges that I’ve said something similar to myself, but you really managed to hammer in the nail with this one, didn’t you?”

“I’m still alive. It’s Abigail that lost her life.” She still hadn’t eaten. “Your food is getting cold.”

Inscrutable as she pretended to be, Hannibal knew that he had made Bedelia uncomfortable. The Baroness placed an acceptable bite of food on her fork before slowly raising it to her mouth. A show? She seemed to have realized his fixation with people eating; if only he had put human in this meal. Shame that he hadn’t, then. This meal was only symbolically human. They ate in silence, him staring at her, enjoying the fact that he made her uncomfortable.

Bedelia seemed to not be able to take the silence for much longer. He had enjoyed the suspense, a moment hanging in the air, but it was a moment for a reason. Staying there too long would ruin it. “You have to be careful Hannibal. They will see your pattern, sooner or later.”

“And what might that be?”

“That most of your proteges are violent or have a history of violence. That pattern.” When she put it like that, Hannibal could see why she came to that conclusion. “The good standing that you have achieved with the Seekers of Truth may slowly rot from the inside. Jack Crawford already came to me with doubts.”

“Do you have doubts?”

Bedelia took another bite and didn’t answer. He didn’t expect her to; he already had one.

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After Hannibal found her at her father’s cabin in Red Crossing, Abigail had been staying at the man’s old estate. Apparently Nesiraya was there to help her with his whims and to teach her one or two things about staying hidden even with other people in the house. Her old and new teacher claimed that this was a technique servants learned to master quickly. Being noticed means you are doing something wrong. That was the idea anyway.

It was late in the evening when his Lordship finally returned to their suite, the smuggest smile of satisfaction was on his face, she decided to ask him: “What exactly is happening to Will? I know what you told me would happen, but I’m- I’m worried about him.” It stung when a small voice inside her reminded her that her worry about WIll was significantly less than the concern about herself. True or not, no one liked being reminded of their selfishness.

“He is perfectly fine,” Hannibal said, and she could smell the lie. “They found the evidence that we planted and will probably stand trial for your murder, but don’t worry. I won’t let it go that far.”

Something felt off. Abigail isn’t sure what exactly was bothering her about this, but no matter what he said it felt like a lie. She couldn’t afford to call him out on it. If it was a lie, what could she really do? Demand the truth from the man that had saved her life and so easily thrown what he had with Will away? The likelihood that her words would go ignored or further lies would be told was far greater than her actually getting a straight answer. “What exactly are your intentions for this charade?”

The corners of Hannibal's lips smiled. Even when he had shown her his face, so much of him was still closed off. "I want Will to grow and change. He has such potential if he would only follow his true nature and join us. Unfortunately to get there requires a bit of subterfuge and pain." She didn't find that very reassuring. Guilt flitted in and out of her, Abigail's very body trying to decide whether or not a physical response was worth it. Something kept poking at her brain: what makes your safety any better than anyone else's? Look at what you condemned him to!

Well, it was her life, her choices. She would just have to live with them.

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With High Seeker Frederick Chilton back in charge of the Bastion d'Argent, Hannibal got in to visit Will with ease. All it took was the promise of being invited to more dinners and continued 'companionship' and the gullible man was eating out of the palm of his hand. That would come back to bite him later when Hannibal's true plan came to fruition. For the moment, he was content to let the sleeping dragon lie, as it were. He could always deliver small torments later.

Once inside the dungeon, he could actively feel the narrow hallways subtly descending deeper into the bowels. It was devoid of decoration and there were distinct gaps between light sources. There were no scones, only torches, which cast shadows on the walls that crept inside. It was a good thing that Hannibal was fond of shadows; they were a great ally whenever he called upon them.

The door to Will's accommodations was made of iron and had a small window about a foot wide and half a foot tall, sitting at eye level. There was a latch on it that allowed the covering on the window to slide back and allow the viewer to peer at the prisoner like they were an exhibit at a zoo. Two guards flanked the cell door, both fidgeting in the presence of nobility; one was glancing toward where Will must've been before muttering a few words and turning back. He got the feeling that this one was currently on duty to repeatedly drain Will's mana. Hannibal didn't bother checking Will's position through the peeping hole or stopping one of the guards to check for him. He simply walked right on in.

There was a space between the door and the set of iron bars about four feet long. It was the perfect length for someone to test boundaries and see where it got them. Will was huddled in the far corner, resting on his cot, and clearly not interested in making conversation. No matter. Hannibal could make plenty for both of them.

"Hello Will," he greeted, smirking. Hannibal removed his obsidian mask, prying back the antlers that framed his face and kept it on his head.

Will moved his head up to glare at him, an expression made of stone. "Hello, Comte Lecter." There was a challenge in his voice, a declaration of intent. Will was going to try and subvert him in any way possible, potentially working against him at any spare moment he could find.

Hannibal couldn't wait to see where this went.

The monster he had once called a friend did not stay long. Will was grateful to see him go. To think of all of the lying, all of the manipulation, that had gone on hurt more than him actually being forced here… and that hurt quite a bit. For so long, Will had avoided other people and the natural sharing of oneself that came with interaction. Now, in the aftermath of this disaster, he had lost everyone. His confidante was a liar, his friends no longer saw him the same, the squad didn't trust him, and Abigail…

Abigail was dead. There was no one left.

Often, Will had heard people describe anger as hot. Fueled by passion and ever growing, rage became an inferno. Demons of wrath were fire barely contained by flimsy skin. Here, anger was cold. It was the chill seeping into his skin from the floor, the lack of warmth aided by a breeze barely felt. The damp that clung to his skin left his shivering, pulling any and all of the remaining heat from his body. He was empty, a void pulled from the earth's deeper places.

His magic was being actively suppressed, he had no company (physical or otherwise) and no tangible possessions. Rage pulled from his deepest being was all that Will had left. Soon, he would be moved and the last of his belongings would stay here, in the Bastion. They told him that the White Spire was next, where the investigation would be continued. He could hardly wait.

Abigail had been smuggled out quickly. Very quickly. Hannibal had told her that he wouldn't be joining her for a while yet; he wanted to go to ValRoyeaux when Will did. Unfortunately that meant a long road with Nesiraya as her only company. Not that Abigail minded the elven woman, she cared for her even, but Nesiraya was not the greatest conversational partner. Abigail had often admired the woman for her bluntness and unappreciation for perceived weakness. What Abigail wanted right now was comfort. Again, her whole life had been ripped away from her, in the very same place no less. The kitchen in her family home would probably never leave her.

Her 're-birth' came at the cost of Will, Alana, and even Beverly (despite how little she actually knew the woman). Now, Abigail was staying with the man behind the machinations, Georgia's murderer. Another life left behind and more people that she would never really know. If she ever saw any of them again, it wouldn't be the same. How could it be?

She wondered what would have happened if she had stayed. Would Jack Crawford be understanding? Where would she have gone?

Her cowardice may have saved her life, it may have not. She will never get a chance to say which choice was better definitively. What it did do was cost Will his freedom. Hannibal seemed convinced that Will was going to lose it regardless (he had said it was a matter of time), but Abigail saw no evidence of that.

Was this her nature? Would Abigail always be stuck with the wrong person, making the wrong cowardly decisions? She didn't know that either.

Chapter End Notes

Dareth shiral: A normal farewell, literally 'safe journeys'

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